

protecting children

the next steps



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Published by the Office for Children, Victorian Government
Department of Human Services, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

July 2005

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Also published on www.dhs.vic.gov.au/protectingchildren

Authorised by the Victorian Government, 555 Collins Street, Melbourne.
Printed by Impact Printing, 69-79 Fallon Street, Brunswick.

(0550605)

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Message from the Premier

Our Government is committed to giving Victoria's children the best possible start in life.

Investing in children's early years, giving parents the help they need to raise their families and ensuring our most vulnerable children and vulnerable young people receive the support they need – when they need it – are amongst the most important things that this Government can do.

The 21st Century has seen the nature of family and community life change.

Our Government recognises the importance of keeping pace with these changes.

This White Paper – *Protecting children ... the next steps* – will enable us to do that by setting out a new policy framework for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people.

It represents the most significant reforms to child, youth and family services in Victoria in a decade and is the result of extensive consultation with many individuals and organisations involved in the care of children, young people and their families.

Our Government aims to create a more integrated system of child, youth and family services – a system that focuses more directly on children's safety, health, learning, well-being and development. We want to connect families to the services they need earlier and to make these services more accessible and more adaptable to the changing needs of today's families.

We cannot achieve lasting change without the help of communities.

And I urge all Victorians to continue helping us make sure Victoria's children are protected and nurtured from birth through to adulthood.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Bracks." The signature is written in a cursive style.

Steve Bracks

Premier of Victoria



Message from the Minister for Children

Since being elected, this Government has worked closely with child, youth and family services to:

- strengthen our early intervention and prevention efforts, and
- improve services and supports for vulnerable children and young people, to increase their opportunities to make a positive contribution to society as adults.

This White Paper builds on existing reforms, to provide a clear road-map for ongoing policy, system and practice change. Some practice changes will require new legal authority. That is why it is important that we take this opportunity to establish a contemporary legislative framework for the delivery of child, youth and family services in Victoria.

Over the past twenty years, Victorian families have experienced more complex problems and multiple causes of social disadvantage.

We have also learnt more about the brain development of children. New scientific knowledge has emphasised the importance of stability, especially in early years of childhood. Unstable care arrangements can set children back for life, as their cognitive, social, emotional, psychological and moral development is delayed. Such developmental delay can cause many problems throughout their childhood and into adulthood, including learning difficulties, low self-esteem, poor impulse control, and poor mental and physical health.

At their core, the actions set out in the White Paper are about the Department of Human Services and the non-government sector working together to ensure the well-being and safety of vulnerable children and young people.

Our Government aims to entrench children and young people's rights, safety and healthy development at the centre of all service delivery and decision making.

Our reforms affirm that families have the primary responsibility to care for, nurture and protect their children and young people and that the great majority of children and young people are better off growing up with their families.

Where children are in need of protection, our aim is to ensure that Child Protection responses focus not only on assuring a child or young person's immediate safety, but also on their longer-term developmental needs.

Where children and young people cannot live safely at home we want to make sure that they receive stable, high-quality care to support their healthy development.

The Victorian Government's White Paper represents a once in a generation opportunity for comprehensive reform.

To everyone across the sector who will have a role to play in making changes and in bringing the reforms to fruition, I look forward to continuing to work with you to make these reforms as strong and effective as possible, for the sake of Victoria's most vulnerable children and vulnerable young people.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sherryl Garbutt".

Sherryl Garbutt

Minister for Children
Minister for Community Services

Introduction to the White Paper

promoting the healthy development of children is both an ethical imperative and a critical economic and social investment. A decent and wise society protects and nurtures all its children, particularly those (who experience) disadvantage, so that they grow up to be productive adults and because it's the right thing to do. (Phillips & Schonkoff, 2000)

Providing children and young people with the best possible start in life, and their families and communities with the help they need to achieve this, is central to the Victorian Government's vision for a fair and prosperous Victoria.

Since 2003, the Government has been working with child, youth and family services and Local Government to deliver more help to vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families. Reforms have emphasised that the protection of children cannot be separated from policies to improve children's lives as a whole. Service organisations, both government and community-based, share responsibility for promoting children's safe and healthy development. Major new initiatives have focused on:

- helping vulnerable families earlier
- building greater cooperation between child, youth and family services
- reducing child abuse and neglect.

This White Paper builds on reforms that are already underway to spell out the Government's action plan for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people in Victoria. The White Paper explains how recent initiatives, such as Best Start projects and Family Support Innovation Projects, fit within a new policy framework.

The White Paper also describes the next steps in the reform agenda to build effective partnerships and offer timely and effective support to vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families. New reform initiatives will be subject to normal government budget processes.

A substantial element of this reform agenda is new legislation. Changes in legislation are critical to implement new policies and ways of delivering services to make a difference in the lives of vulnerable children and vulnerable young people.

The Government's vision for helping people, groups and places to overcome disadvantage and to widen access to opportunities is embedded in *A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage*. *A Fairer Victoria*, outlined a wide range of actions to help vulnerable children and young people grow up healthier, happier and better able to fulfil their potential.

The Government wants to hear Victorian's views on the likely effect of the legislative changes and how those changes will achieve the Government's policy and service reforms. Copies of the draft *Children's Bill* and more information about the consultation process is available on the *Protecting children* Website: www.dhs.vic.gov.au/protectingchildren. Comments are also invited on the principles for inclusion in a new *Child Well-being and Safety Bill*, which are set out at Appendix 2 of the White Paper.



The background to reform

In Victoria, most children and young people are doing well. While most families experience challenges and problems from time to time, most will resolve these through supportive family, community and friendship networks and through seeking help and advice from professionals and services.

For some families, if problems become worse, family circumstances can seriously affect a child's development and future well-being. For example, a 2002 study in Victoria showed that children and young people entering out-of-home care for the first time already had multiple problems relating to mental and physical health, emotional and behavioural functioning, and cognitive and educational achievement. These are problems that can have long-term effects on a child or young person's ability to fully participate in social and economic life as an adult.

Over the past 20 years the characteristics of families coming into contact with Child Protection have become more complex. Recent research has shown that the major contributing factors to such involvement include one or more of the following:

- long-term poverty
- lack of extended family or social support
- domestic violence
- parental drug and alcohol misuse
- parental mental health issues
- parents with significant learning difficulties and/or intellectual disabilities
- single parenthood and/or blended families.

Actions spelt out in the White Paper are primarily focused on vulnerable children and vulnerable young people whose development and well-being are jeopardised by their family's circumstances, sometimes meaning that they are in need of protection. More detail on the circumstances and characteristics of Victoria's children, young people and families whose needs are at the centre of this White Paper is provided at Appendix I.

Health, community and early childhood education services play a critical role in supporting children, young people and their families. These services can be split into three major categories:

- **universal services**, such as kindergartens, maternal and child health services and education services that provide the critical foundations for health and learning for all children, including vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families
- **secondary and specialist services**, such as family support services, drug and alcohol, health, mental health, disability, housing and family support services that provide more intensive and targeted support where a problem has been identified
- **tertiary child protection and out-of-home care services** for children and young people who are in need of protection.

Child, youth and family services within each of these categories make an important difference in the lives of vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families. They help to reduce parental stress, improve confidence, strengthen parent-child relationships and promote children's health, development and learning. They can also help to build stronger communities by creating opportunities for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families to become actively involved in their local neighbourhoods.

Victoria has a strong history of child, youth and family service provision through local government and community-based services. Family support and out-of-home care services, in particular, are commonly delivered by a diverse range of community service organisations. This diversity creates opportunities for innovation. The involvement of many agencies delivering a broad array of services has, however, led to considerable fragmentation. This fragmentation can cause difficulties for families and for professionals seeking help for families and children. Boundaries exist between agencies, when a more joined-up approach would bring greater benefit to children, young people and their families.

The paper focuses on those services delivered by the Department of Human Services and community sector organisations, which are targeted at vulnerable children, vulnerable young people and their families. Relevant services include:

- secondary child, youth and family services, including family support services¹
- out-of-home care services
- specialist services for children and young people in out-of-home care
- Child Protection.

However, the principles and policies that govern the ongoing development of Victoria's broader health and community services infrastructure and guide its administration should complement those set out in this White Paper. Early childhood services, in particular, are critical partners in protecting children and promoting their development and future well-being.

¹ Secondary services are described as 'designated services' in the *Children's Bill*.

A new policy framework

Under the Government's new policy framework for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people, the next steps in reform involve:

- enshrining children and young people's best interests at the heart of all decision-making and service delivery across the service system, from early intervention through to the Children's Court
- new arrangements to achieve stability for children and young people who cannot live safely at home, in a timely way, to assure their healthy development
- boosting earlier intervention where families have problems
- child, youth and family services forming an integrated service system so that families receive the mix of services they need in a coordinated way
- targeting secondary services at the most vulnerable groups and communities in Victoria
- strengthening the cultural responsiveness of services so that community services are inclusive of children and young people from Aboriginal and other cultural backgrounds
- keeping Aboriginal children and young people connected to their culture and community.





System and practice changes

Significant system and practice changes will be involved in implementing the Government's new policy framework.

Earlier intervention and prevention

Intervening early when families first show signs of difficulty can help to improve family resilience, promote healthy child development, and reduce child abuse and neglect.

The existing Family Support Innovation Projects have demonstrated a new model of earlier intervention. In these projects, secondary child, youth and family services have established common intake and referral services. These services provide a visible point for teachers, police, health and community services, neighbours, extended family or anyone else in the community to report concerns about the well-being and development of a child or young person. An important goal of the projects has been to develop a local network of services (including child protection, family support, mental health, drug and alcohol and family violence services) that work together and share responsibility for protecting children and young people, promoting their development, and supporting families.

Community-based intake and referral services will continue to be established on a sub-regional basis across Victoria. Government funding for secondary child, youth and family services will be clearly targeted at vulnerable families with more complex problems. Where appropriate, geographic boundaries for community-based intake and referral services will be aligned with other place-based service initiatives (such as Primary Care Partnerships). Where possible, referral tools used by secondary services will be made compatible with referral tools used by other health and community services.

In addition to the existing referral processes, the *Children's Bill* authorises secondary services to receive referrals where there are significant concerns about a child, and to consult with certain categories of professionals (including Child Protection, teachers, mental health providers, police, and drug and alcohol providers). Secondary services will be authorised to refer families on to other professionals, but ongoing coordination of service delivery will require the family's consent. If the agency assesses that a child is at significant risk, they will be required to refer the case to Child Protection. Common risk and needs assessment tools will be developed for use by secondary services and Child Protection.

In order to promote consistent quality assurance processes for all community services, the *Children's Bill* sets out a formal process for registering services that comply with service standards. Registration requirements will be introduced over three years, providing opportunities for regional offices of the Department of Human Services to work with existing agencies to meet service standards. Secondary services will need to be registered to participate in the new information sharing arrangements.

Integrating service responses to vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families

Kindergartens, maternal and child health nurses, early childhood education services, family support services and protective services have generally operated separately in Victoria. The major system change in the Government's policy framework is to better integrate these services so that they form a cohesive service system.

Assisting families with multiple problems to bring about positive change will also often involve a much broader range of services, including mental health, drug and alcohol, housing and family violence services. Some of the Family Support Innovation Projects have had considerable success in improving service collaboration and coordination, establishing a basis for better informed referral decisions and easier linkages of families to the range of services they need.

The next step is to redesign the role of local service networks across Victoria, to ensure a shared approach to responding to vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families.

Child Protection

The threshold for intake into Child Protection will continue to be that a child or young person is in need of protection.

Currently, Child Protection is required to investigate all reported concerns about a child or young person. Child Protection is constrained from providing other more appropriate responses such as referral to other services. Under new arrangements, Child Protection will receive reports and assess them according to both need and risk. Some reports will be classified as notifications, in which case they must be investigated. In other cases, Child Protection may provide advice or consultation to a professional. Child Protection may also refer the matter to a community-based intake and referral service for appropriate assistance to the family.

This new approach will integrate Child Protection with secondary services in a way that is not currently possible and will fill the current gap in responding to vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families.

The *Children's Bill* strengthens Child Protection's investigation powers by creating a temporary assessment order in new legislation. The Children's Court will be able to direct parents to allow Child Protection access to a child or young person, or authorise Child Protection to access relevant information (such as the child or young person's medical records).

The *Children's Bill* also allows secondary services and Child Protection to receive reports about unborn children where there are concerns that the child is likely to be in need of protection once they are born. The purpose of receiving the report will be to help put services and supports in place for the mother, so that Child Protection does not need to be involved once the child is born. Protective interventions will not be permitted until after the birth of the child.

A new ground for seeking a Children's Court order in relation to children exhibiting sexually abusive behaviour is proposed. The ground will apply to children aged 10 to 14. The Children's Court will be able to make a therapeutic treatment order and, where necessary, place the child or young person away from home for the purposes of fulfilling the treatment order.

The *Children's Bill* also spells out responsibilities for the care and safety of children and young people in State care. This includes a new responsibility to provide support as they reach maturity and leave State care, in a similar way that parents provide support to their children in early years of adulthood.

Improving children's stability

A critical reform is to improve the stability of children and young people who cannot live safely at home. Over the past decade we have learnt more about the brain development of children. New scientific knowledge emphasises the importance of stable care and relationships, especially in the early years of childhood. Unstable care arrangements can cause developmental delay, long-term behavioural problems, learning difficulties, and problems in forming positive relationships.

Where the Children's Court orders a child or young person to be placed out of home, the *Children's Bill* requires Child Protection to develop a stability plan within timeframes relevant to the child's age.

The goal will still be to return the child or young person home safely as quickly as possible. Child Protection, community services and other adult services (including mental health, drug and alcohol, and disability services) will need to collaborate and coordinate service responses in order to maximise the likelihood of reunification of children and young people with their families.

Stability planning is about informed and structured decisions for longer-term care arrangements for children and young people to provide for their healthy development. Better planning will help to prevent developmental problems associated with multiple failed attempts at reunification.

More solution-focused decision making

Another important legislative reform is to enable and encourage flexible and solution-focused approaches to decision making. The wider use of family group conferencing will be developed in the new service system.

New approaches to appropriate dispute resolution in the Children's Court will also be developed. It is proposed to change the existing provisions for pre-hearing conferences to focus on reaching solutions earlier.

The participation of children, young people, families and, where appropriate, other carers will be encouraged in all decision-making processes.

Reforms for Aboriginal children and young people

An important part of the reforms is to strengthen the Department of Human Services compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. New models of kinship care will be established that reflect shared care of children and young people in Aboriginal communities. New initiatives will help to ensure that Aboriginal children and young people who are placed in out-of-home care remain connected to their culture and community.

A longer-term reform is to transfer the responsibility for making decisions about Aboriginal children to Aboriginal communities. The *Children's Bill* enables the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to assign responsibility for managing a court order to the head of an approved Aboriginal organisation. The Government will work with Aboriginal organisations to build their capacity to assume greater case planning and case management responsibilities for Aboriginal children involved in Child Protection.



New legislation

Some practice changes will require new legal authority. In particular, legislative backing is required to:

- support the operation of community-based intake and referral services
- clarify information-sharing arrangements
- enable Aboriginal communities to take greater responsibility for Aboriginal children and young people subject to Children's Court orders
- specify new functions and responsibilities for Child Protection
- support appropriate new decision-making models.

Legislation can also be used proactively to promote the Government's new policy framework for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people, including, for example, to:

- enshrine the 'best interests' principle (mentioned earlier in the section titled 'A new policy framework')
- establish consistent quality assurance processes and a formal process for registering agencies based on compliance with service standards
- establish a responsibility on the Secretary to assist young people leaving care, up to the age of 21, to make the transition to independent living
- promote more culturally appropriate service provision
- promote compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.

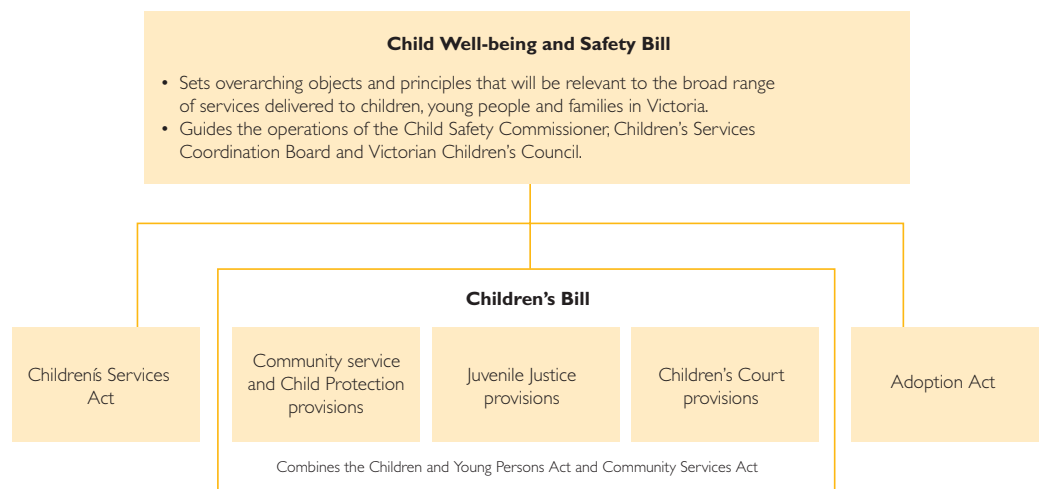
In 2004 the Victorian Government released a discussion paper, *Protecting children: ten priorities for children's well-being and safety in Victoria*, which explored potential legislative changes based on consolidating the *Children and Young Persons Act 1989* and the *Community Services Act 1970*.

Since the release of the 'protecting children' papers, two pieces of legislation have been developed for introduction into Parliament in Spring 2005:

1. the *Child Well-being and Safety Bill*, which will frame all legislation relating to child, youth and family services. It will give effect to recent announcements by the Victorian Government, and guide the operation of the Child Safety Commissioner; a Victorian Children's Council and a Children's Services Coordination Board. The Bill will also set out the responsibilities of families, communities and service providers and establish high-level principles to guide delivery of all child, youth and family services (universal, secondary and tertiary).
2. the *Children's Bill*, which combines and updates the *Children and Young Persons Act* and the *Community Services Act*. It will provide a contemporary legislative base for the delivery of secondary child, youth and family services and Child Protection, Juvenile Justice and Children's Court provisions.

The relationship between the two Bills is illustrated in Figure 1.

*Figure 1
New legislative structure for child, youth and family services in Victoria*



Consultations on the exposure draft of the *Children's Bill* will take place across Victoria throughout August and September 2005. A guide to the new provisions within the *Children's Bill* and the key changes to the current *Children and Young Persons Act* and the *Community Services Act* will assist with interpretation of the legislation. This guide, *Protecting children ... a guide to the Children's Bill*, can also be accessed on the Protecting children project Website, www.dhs.vic.gov.au/protectingchildren.

The exposure draft of the *Children's Bill* includes amendments to Criminal Division provisions of the existing *Children and Young Persons Act*. In particular, those amendments will replace references to 'juvenile justice' with 'youth justice', and will introduce group conferencing in youth justice proceedings. Group conferencing is a restorative justice program that has operated as a pilot for a number of years. Other changes include provisions relating to change of name applications by young people undergoing sentences of detention. More detail on the age changes to the Criminal Division and other recent reforms to the Criminal Division is available on the Department of Human Services Website, www.dhs.vic.gov.au/juvenilejustice.

progress on reforms to-date

Parts of the Victorian Government's new policy framework have already begun to be implemented. Since 2003, the Government has been working with child, youth and family services to steadily reform services targeted at vulnerable children and their families. Actions that have already been taken are making a difference in building on families' existing strengths to address their more complex needs and reduce risk factors. This work has laid the foundations for the significant legislative reforms and system changes spelt out in this White Paper. Key initiatives and actions to date to support vulnerable children and vulnerable young people are summarised in Table 1.

*Table 1
Actions to-date*

Appointment of the Minister for Children and establishment of the Office for Children and the Children's Services Coordination Board.
Victorian Children's Council created.
Child Safety Commissioner appointed.
Children and young people given a voice through family group conferencing and the creation of the Advocate for Children in Care.
By 2005-06, Family Support Innovation Projects will be in local government areas that account for 62 per cent of notifications received each year.
Three hundred and twenty children and young people in care have benefited from specialised therapeutic services delivered through the Take Two program.
The Looking After Children framework was introduced to promote improvements in the quality of care children receive in out-of-home care.
Children in care have benefited from additional resources for carers for medical and education expenses, and from increases to residential care funding.
A new mediation service (Finding Solutions) is helping young people to work through conflict and problems with their families.
New mentoring programs for young people aged 16 to 18 years as they prepare to leave out-of-home care, to give them opportunities to interact with adults in community settings and promote a sense of community.
Partnering with local government to coordinate services and better meet local needs through maternal and child health services, municipal early years plans, Best Start projects and the School-Focussed Youth Service program.
Increased supports for families with young children through supported parent groups and playgroups and increases in grants paid to kindergartens.
Better support for Aboriginal families through Aboriginal Best Start, Aboriginal Family Support Innovation Projects, Koori maternity service providers, family preservation services, a family restoration program, and time out and healing services.
Expansion of Aboriginal Family Decision Making, following a successful pilot in Shepparton in regional Victoria.
Implementation of services to support the Protocol between the Department of Human Services and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, which requires the involvement of an Aboriginal agency in key decision-making about Aboriginal children who have been reported to Child Protection.
Improved support for children with a disability or developmental delay and their families, including more early childhood intervention services and individually tailored support packages.
Connecting to community is a strategic plan for transferring the management of out-of-home care placements of Aboriginal children from mainstream services to Aboriginal agencies.

Policy background to the White Paper

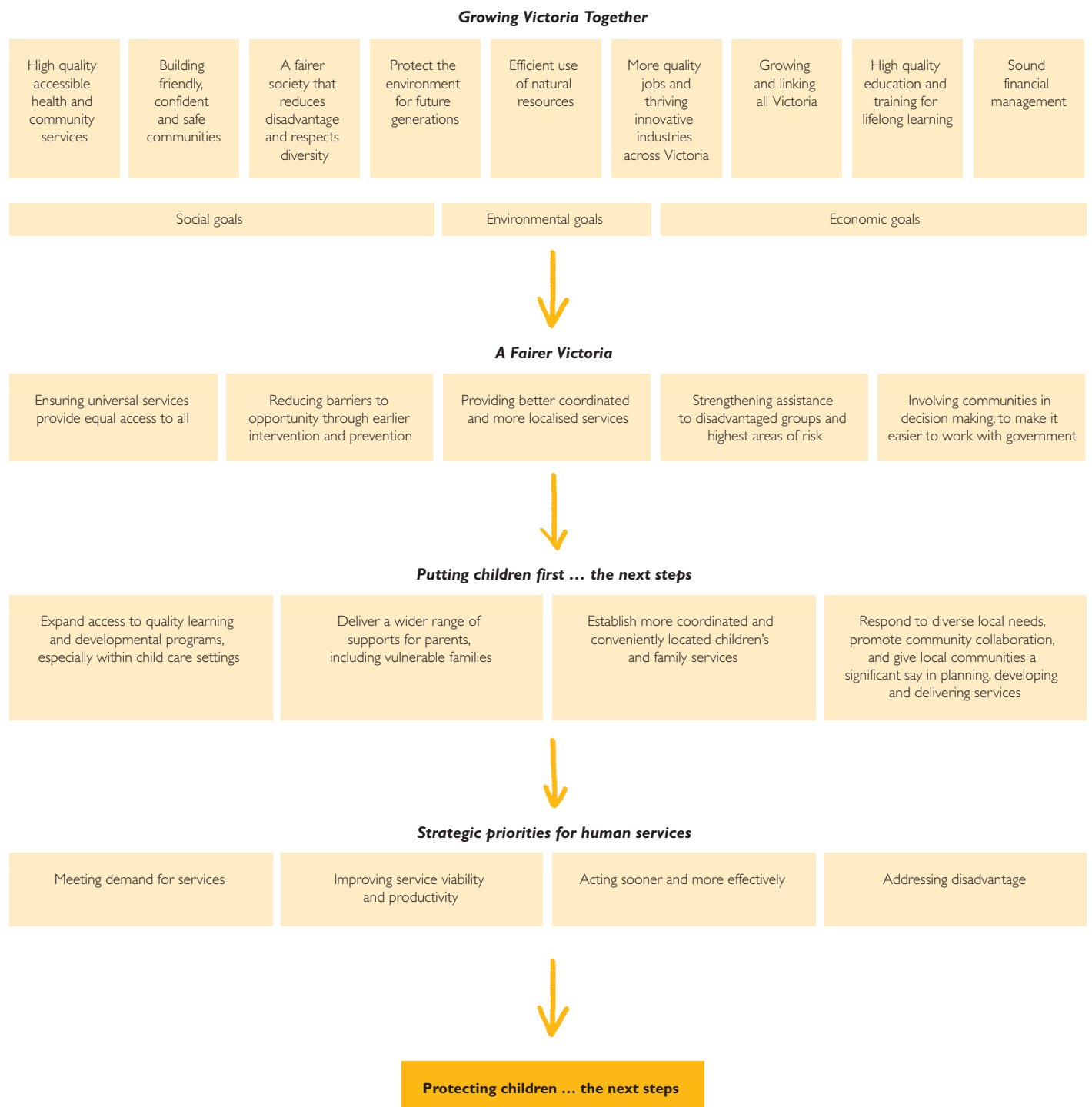
The Victorian Government's new policy framework for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people has been informed by three major recent policy statements. These policy statements have been released in the past 12 months and have set reform directions and priorities for all areas of human services. They are:

- *Putting children first ... the next steps*, which describes the Government's aspirations for children from birth through to school.
- *Growing Victoria Together*, which sets out the Government's priorities for the next ten years. The vision was first released in November 2001 and refreshed in March 2005 to reflect evolving community needs and concerns.
- *A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage*, the Government's action plan to address social disadvantage.

These policy statements, together with the Department of Human Services' strategic plan for human services in Victoria, provide the policy context for this White Paper. This policy context is summarised in Figure 2.

The detailed actions set out in these papers have been developed through a comprehensive process of review, analysis and consultation. Modernisation of the policy settings for Victoria's child and family service system began in 2003 with a Ministerial statement, *Putting Victoria's children first*, from the Minister for Community Services. Legislative changes have been informed by two major reviews and over 300 consultations with agencies, professionals, experts and young people. The reform chronology is set out in Appendix 3.

Figure 2
Policy context for putting children first...the next steps



Our action plan

The White Paper describes the Victorian Government's policy framework for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people. It sets out the directions and priorities for ongoing reform of child, youth and family services in Victoria.

The paper's 74 actions are set out under 14 strategies, and separated into three parts, as described below. Appendix 4 sets out all of these actions, in a reference table that identifies whether they are legislative actions (part of a Bill), or actions that cut across government functions, or actions that will be implemented by the Department of Human Services.

Part 1: Vulnerable children and vulnerable young people protected and nurtured to adulthood

The Government will measure the difference that its new policy framework makes in:

- maximising vulnerable children's good health, learning, development, stability and well-being
- helping families to address problems and to provide safe and nurturing homes for their children
- building a high-quality and integrated service system.

Part 1 sets out three strategies to develop performance measures to ensure continuing focus on and positive improvements in the issues that matter in the lives of vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families.

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| Strategy 1 | Vulnerable children and vulnerable young people are protected and nurtured to adulthood. |
| Strategy 1.1 | Defining and measuring outcomes. |
| Strategy 1.2 | Embedding an outcomes focus in all service delivery and decision-making. |
| Strategy 2 | Supporting families and communities to care for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people. |
| Strategy 2.1 | Defining and measuring outcomes. |
| Strategy 3 | Establishing an integrated child, youth and family service system. |

Part 2: Changes in service delivery: creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage

Part 2 examines how the Government's framework for social policy reform, *A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage* will be applied in promoting improved outcomes for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people. Key strategies are:

- Strategy 4** Ensuring that universal services provide equal opportunity for all.
- Strategy 5** Reducing barriers to opportunity, including through earlier intervention and prevention.
 - Strategy 5.1** Earlier intervention through community-based referral and service intake points.
 - Strategy 5.2** Child Protection's role in supporting earlier intervention and prevention.
 - Strategy 5.3** Specialist functions of Child Protection.
- Strategy 6** Providing coordinated services, that better meet local needs.
- Strategy 7** Targeting assistance to priority populations and the highest areas of risk.
 - Strategy 7.1** Improved stability for children and young people in Child Protection and out-of-home care.
 - Strategy 7.2** Aboriginal children, young people and families.
 - Strategy 7.3** Children, young people and families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
 - Strategy 7.4** Young people involved in the youth justice system.
 - Strategy 7.5** Young people in out-of-home care.
 - Strategy 7.6** Children with a disability.
- Strategy 8** Appropriate dispute resolution: involving children, young people, families, and communities in decision-making.
- Strategy 9** Making it easier to work with government.

Part 3: Administering the service system to achieve outcomes

Part 3 examines the key elements of systems management. Strategies relate to:

Strategy 10 Building shared objectives in order to place children and young people's best interests at the heart of decision-making and service delivery.

Strategy 11 Accountability and quality assurance.

Strategy 11.1 Accountability.

Strategy 11.2 Quality assurance.

Strategy 12 Promoting learning and innovation.

Strategy 12.1 Improving access to and use of data.

Strategy 12.2 Performance measures and evaluation.

Strategy 12.3 Research.

Strategy 12.4 Sharing learning.

Strategy 13 Integrating planning and sector development.

Strategy 13.1 Workforce development.

Strategy 14 Building strong relationships within child, youth and family services and across government.

Strategy 14.1 Working better with government.

Strategy 14.2 More effective sharing of information.



part 1

Vulnerable children and vulnerable young people are protected and nurtured to adulthood

Government will act to improve the safety, health, development, learning and well-being of all Victoria's children and young people.

For vulnerable children and young people, this will mean:

- they engage in health and early learning programs
- they participate in school, training and employment
- the effects of trauma from abuse or neglect or dysfunction in the family are addressed to prevent ongoing problem behaviours.
- provision of stronger systems of support to parents and carers and communities so that children and young people have the best start in life, and are nurtured and protected to adulthood



Context of Part 1

In order to know that vulnerable children and vulnerable young people are doing better, government needs to measure progress across a range of areas. The Government is committed to building an outcomes focus across both the child, youth and family services that are targeted to vulnerable families – the main focus of this White Paper – and the broader health, education and community service infrastructure from which these vulnerable families can benefit.

An outcomes focus means that those involved in helping vulnerable children and vulnerable young people – the Government, community agencies, professionals, local governments and communities – have a shared set of outcomes towards which they work. These outcomes and associated indicators summarise:

- the safety, health, development, learning and well-being of children and young people
- the capacity of families to provide effective care and of communities to support them
- the effectiveness of the supports and services in meeting the changing needs of children, young people and families.

As recommended by the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee, these outcomes would be monitored across the whole population. However, this approach needs to recognise the diversity within the Victorian community. In particular, there are population groups that are known to require particular attention, both in the specification of these outcomes and in the monitoring of these outcomes. These groups include:

- Aboriginal children and families
- immigrants, particularly humanitarian entrants
- families affected by disability, either of a child or of a parent
- families living for long periods in poverty, with lack of employment that is often compounded by other complex needs.

A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage identifies these Victorians as among those likely to be disadvantaged and requiring specific additional support.

The appointment of a Minister for Children, the establishment of the Office for Children and the associated structural reforms announced by the Government in *Putting children first ... the next steps* have been put in place so that the safety, healthy development, learning and well-being of Victoria's children will improve.

This fundamental purpose underlies the Government's reforms in this area.

Equally, this is the underlying goal of the many agencies and professionals whose work will be strengthened as the result of these reforms - to see better outcomes for the children and young people with whom they work. The same is true of the broader set of services working with children and families, such as kindergartens or child health teams in community health services.

To date, however, neither the Victorian Government nor these agencies have adequately or explicitly articulated these outcomes. As a result:

- Policy and programs relating to children and young people have tended to be designed around particular service types and disciplines. Policies have focused on children and young people because they are ill, disabled, attending a particular service, in need of protection or have committed an offence.
- This has contributed to issues of children and young people's safety becoming disconnected from broader considerations about their learning, health, development and well-being.
- The community has little information on which to judge whether, why and where additional effort might be required to realise the Government's vision that all children and young people get the best start in life.

Importantly, a stronger focus on outcomes delivers new opportunities for collaboration – among child, youth and family services, and with other services – that can help to address disadvantage and create opportunities. This will include education, health, mental health, drug and alcohol, housing, and disability services.

Different combinations of service responses may result from a more integrated consideration of outcomes, especially for vulnerable children and young people. For example, services dedicated to improving parenting skills might be combined with services to support a child's positive early development. A greater therapeutic focus could be built into residential care services so as to better respond to high risk behaviours among young people. Broader approaches to family responses may incorporate new services directed at children and young people who have witnessed violence.

As the Complex Clients Project is showing, cooperation between a range of service providers who work with individuals is important in addressing the problems and circumstances that prevent individuals and families from fully participating in social and economic life.

New projects such as Looking After Children, the *Quality assurance strategy for out-of-home care*, the quality framework for child, youth and family services and the new Client Relationship Information System for Service Providers are already building a culture that has greater emphasis on outcomes, evaluation, research and performance measurement.

Outcome goals and measures for children in their critical early years will be developed in more detail through a Statewide Plan for Children. The Government committed to this plan in *Putting children first ... the next steps*. While it will have a universal focus, particular attention will be given to the early development of children who come from disadvantaged groups and communities.

Actions set out in Part I of the White Paper will help to entrench a focus on outcomes in all decision-making and service delivery by:

- beginning to explore what matters most in helping vulnerable children and young people to experience a healthy childhood
- describing the processes that are underway to better define clear measures and targets to help us focus on the issues that are central to vulnerable children and vulnerable young people's lives
- continuing to focus on the effectiveness of services and supports in helping families to be strong, resilient and nurturing
- emphasising the role of child, youth and family services in strengthening communities
- promoting a high quality, viable, and integrated child, youth and family service system.

Part I spells out three strategies to build an outcomes focus in all service delivery and decision-making, as summarised in Figure 3.

*Figure 3
Vulnerable children and vulnerable young people are protected and nurtured to adulthood, Strategies 1 to 3*

Strategy 1: Vulnerable children and vulnerable young people are protected and nurtured to adulthood

across the domains of safety, learning, health, development and well-being. In specifying and monitoring these outcomes, attention will be given to the particular needs of vulnerable groups, including their stability, participation in learning and local communities and a positive sense of identity.

Strategy 2: Supporting families and communities to care for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people

so that:

- families are enabled to provide effective care in the child's best interests
- strong communities value children and young people, respect diversity, value culture and build resilience and connectedness of children, young people and families.



Strategy 3: Establishing an integrated child, youth and family service system

so that Victoria has the right mix of quality services, which are integrated, culturally responsive and meet changing and varied needs, to promote positive outcomes, intervene early and prevent harm.



Strategy 1: Vulnerable children and vulnerable young people are protected and nurtured to adulthood

The Victorian Government's vision is that children and young people are provided with the best start in life and that families are given the help they need to achieve this.

All Victorian children and young people should be supported to:

- be safe
- be healthy
- participate in learning from early childhood through to adulthood
- achieve major developmental milestones
- experience a general state of well-being, including through connecting to family, friends and their local community.

Vulnerable children and vulnerable young people experience particular challenges, and are less likely to do well in a range of these areas. In building a stronger outcome focus, it is important to take account of the issues that can make a significant and lifelong difference. These issues will vary for particular vulnerable groups and communities.

For those children and young people whose development may have been affected by neglect, abuse or poor care, particular attention needs to be given to:

- emotional and behavioural development
- cognitive and educational development (and related developmental delay)
- socialisation and attachment
- self-care skills
- identity, including cultural attachment.

A 2002 study of children and young people entering care for the first time highlights the impact of abuse and neglect on child learning, health, development and well-being (Royal Children's Hospital Mental Health Service, 2005). Comprehensive and multidisciplinary assessments were conducted in relation to 122 children and young people aged zero to 17:

- 75 met criteria for a major mental health diagnosis and required a mental health referral. This was more common among older children.
- 91 had conditions requiring medical or allied health follow-up.
- Of 55 children tested, 30 had some level of cognitive deficit.

There is strong evidence linking neglect and abuse as a child, to impoverished levels of attachment and to conduct disorders. These disorders are in turn linked to poor early learning and developmental delay and can lead to lifelong disrupted relationships, higher rates of involvement in the criminal justice system, and poor care of their own children.

Similarly, children and young people who have experienced neglect and abuse can be less able to look after themselves or are more prone to risk-taking behaviours. This population group is at high risk of long-term involvement in other tertiary service systems (including drug and alcohol, mental health, and homelessness services).

For vulnerable Aboriginal children and young people, all of these factors will be relevant. In addition, cultural identity is a crucial component of development and well-being. Cultural identity is also important for children with a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Indicators will be developed to measure and monitor cultural linkage of children and young people from these population groups.

As well as measuring more specific factors within the areas of safety, health, learning, well-being and development, it is also important to monitor progress in addressing the environmental factors that are known to impact on life outcomes. Stable relationships and care, for example, have an enormous impact on children and young people's healthy development. Especially in early childhood, instability can affect the development of learning skills, the ability to form attachments, and self-esteem and impulse control.

One young person who grew up cycling between home and different carers summed up the long-term effects in the following way:

I need somewhere stable, but I can't because I haven't got that kind of background of knowing what stability feels like. I just can't. I feel like I've always got to move on because if I stay in one place too long, it will suck. Like I used to have this rule, and I still live by it, once I know where everything in the kitchen goes, its time to leave.

For young people involved in the youth justice area, specific indicators will also need to be developed to monitor progress in improving reintegration into social and economic life.



Action 1.1

The Government, in conjunction with the Victorian Children's Council, will prepare a Statewide Plan for Children. In the first instance, this plan will focus on what children need in order to do well in early childhood.

Action 1.2

The Department of Human Services will work with early years services to develop and implement a quality framework for early years services, to promote continuous quality improvement among these services.

Action 1.3

The Department of Human Services will work with secondary services, Child Protection and out-of-home care services to develop and implement a quality framework for child, youth and family services.

All 74 White Paper Actions are tabulated in Appendix 4.

Strategy 1.1 Defining and measuring outcomes

Outcome measures will be developed to drive a shared understanding and focus on goals and objectives for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people among child, youth and family services in Victoria. Outcome measures will be developed through the following:

Statewide Plan for Children

In its policy statement *Putting children first ... the next steps*, the Government committed to the development of a Statewide Plan for Children. In the first instance, a Statewide Plan will be developed which focuses on early childhood. The plan will promote the healthy development of all children in their critical early years, by establishing clear measures and targets to provide a focus on the issues central to children's lives – their safety, health, learning, development and well-being. Goals, targets and measures will be adapted to recognise the specific needs and circumstances of vulnerable groups and communities.

A quality framework for early years services

In its response to the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee, the Government committed to the development of an integrated quality framework for early years services in Victoria. The quality framework will help to embed outcome measures for early childhood (including specific measures for vulnerable groups and communities) in quality systems for early years services. This will support an open and coordinated process for planning, quality assurance, evaluation, learning, and ongoing service improvements.

A quality framework for child, youth and family services

Clear measures and targets across the key elements of a healthy childhood for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people will be set out in a quality framework for child, youth and family services. The quality framework will help the service system to monitor specific indicators relevant to vulnerable children and vulnerable young people. This will provide a basis for determining whether these children and young people are receiving the help they need.

The quality framework will be targeted at Child Protection, secondary child, youth and family services, and out-of-home care services.

The Allen report on child protection emphasised that 'the foundation for the directions for reform must be a community partnership for the welfare and protection of children, based on the view that child protection cannot be separated from policies to improve children's lives as a whole' (The Allen Consulting Group, 2003).

The quality framework for child, youth and family services will also help to build a strong culture of shared responsibility for children among families, communities, service providers and Child Protection. The framework will provide specific guidance on the issues of critical importance for these vulnerable children and vulnerable young people, including their stability, safety, connectedness to family and community, their social, emotional and behavioural development and emphasis upon a positive sense of identity.

Action 1.4

A charter of rights for children in care will be developed by the Advocate for Children in Care.

Action 1.5

The *Children's Bill* makes the Secretary responsible for implementing the charter of rights for children in care.

Action 1.6

The Department of Human Services will work with Aboriginal communities and community-controlled agencies to develop and implement a charter for Aboriginal children's well-being and safety.

Action 1.7

The *Child Well-being and Safety Bill* will make the Secretary of the Department of Human Services responsible for implementing the charter for Aboriginal children's well-being and safety.

Action 1.8

The Department of Human Services will develop new and quality frameworks for youth justice and youth services targeted at vulnerable youth.

A charter of rights of children in care

Another important tool for communicating outcome goals will be the charter of rights of children in care. The charter will be developed with children who are currently or have previously been in out-of-home care, as well as with child, youth and family services and other experts. The charter will help to ensure that all children and young people in out-of-home care receive the benefit of the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Secretary of the Department of Human Services has a duty of care to these children and will be given a legislative responsibility for promoting the charter.

A charter for Aboriginal children's well-being and safety

Consistent with the Government's focus on tailoring social policy responses to the needs of particular priority populations, the Department of Human Services will work with Aboriginal communities, community-controlled organisations and mainstream health and community services to develop a charter for Aboriginal children's well-being and safety. This charter will spell out clear targets and measures for Aboriginal children and young people. It will describe the roles and responsibilities of families, communities, community-controlled agencies and mainstream services in making a positive difference in the lives of Aboriginal children and young people. Appropriate linkages will be made between the charter for Aboriginal children's well-being and safety and the charter of rights for children in out-of-home care.

The *Child Well-being and Safety Bill* will give the Secretary of the Department of Human Services responsibility for implementing the charter for Aboriginal children's well-being and safety.

As well as jointly developing the charter, the Department for Human Services will publish a handbook, developed by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, entitled *Caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care*. The handbook will provide advice and guidance to non-Aboriginal care-givers caring for Aboriginal children on how to maintain and promote cultural connectedness, and on other relevant issues, such as how to deal with racism in the community.

A youth justice quality framework

Outcome measures for young people involved with the youth justice system will be detailed through a new youth justice quality framework. The framework will support the diversion and rehabilitation of young people involved with the youth justice system. It will target both internal youth justice services and funded services, delivered by non-government agencies.

The quality framework will underpin planning, review and evaluation, quality assurance activities and service improvement initiatives in youth justice.

A framework for vulnerable youth services

The framework will seek to establish common goals and shared principles for vulnerable youth services and to identify clear future directions for development. The framework will include a stocktake of key existing and planned initiatives for vulnerable young people within the department across the areas of prevention, early intervention, diversion, intervention and transition. The framework will consider the roles of, and communication pathways with, key partners in the provision of services to young people, including young people themselves.

The Minister for Children and the Office for Children will ensure the delivery of high quality, accessible child, youth and family services.

This new machinery of government will take the lead in strengthening the consistency and effectiveness of policies, programs and services relating to vulnerable children and young people across government.

Strategy 1.2 Embedding an outcomes focus in all service delivery and decision-making

The Government has already established a new structure to help entrench an outcomes focus in all service delivery and decision-making for all children, but especially vulnerable children and vulnerable young people. This structure includes the creation of the following:

A Minister for Children

A Minister for Children was appointed in December 2004 to ensure children are given a higher priority across all Government policies, programs and activities. The Minister for Children will deliver a strong, consistent voice in advocating for all children and vulnerable young people across the whole of the Government.

This appointment demonstrates the Government's commitment to elevating children to the forefront of the policy and service delivery agenda. The Minister will also build collaborative relationships with the Federal Government and with local government authorities to coordinate services between all levels of government.

An Office for Children

A single Office for Children has been established in the Department of Human Services to bring together the major services provided to children and vulnerable young people. The office has a range of service delivery responsibilities relating to children, including:

- services for children prior to school entry, such as maternal and child health, child care and kindergarten
- services for children with a disability or developmental delay
- community services targeted at vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families, especially those involved with Child Protection and youth justice.

The new office will drive a stronger focus on the development of all children, as recommended by the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee.

Strengthening the link between universal and secondary child, youth and family services and Child Protection will assist in shifting the focus to prevention and early intervention for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families.

The Office for Children will play a leadership role in ensuring policies, programs and services for children and vulnerable young people are coordinated. It will have strong links with the Departments for Victorian Communities, Health, Community Services, Education and Training, and Youth and Local Government.

New mechanisms to support whole-of-government collaboration

New mechanisms to support a whole-of-government focus on the outcomes of children and young people are discussed in more detail in Part 3. New mechanisms include:

- a Victorian Children's Council, made up of professionals and experts, especially from the early years' fields
- a Children's Services Coordination Board, whose membership is to include the Secretaries of the Departments of Premier and Cabinet, Treasury and Finance, Human Services, Education and Training, Justice, Victorian Communities, and the Chief Commissioner of Police.

Action 2.1

The Victorian Government will continue to invest in strategies to strengthen communities that have high levels of disadvantage, to improve opportunities for residents and build positive networks of support within the community.

Strategy 2: Supporting families and communities to care for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people

A key principle of the Victorian Government's new policy framework is to build strong and resilient families. The proposed *Children's Bill* emphasises the central role of families in promoting children and young people's safe, stable and healthy development, through a set of guiding principles, which provide that:

- families have primary responsibility for the upbringing, healthy development and protection of their children and young people within the community
- the preferred way of ensuring the well-being of all children and young people is through providing families with access to the information, services and resources useful to assist in raising children
- communities, community services and the Government all have responsibility for strengthening the capacity of families to participate in their local communities
- social inclusion of the most vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families should be supported
- if family members are unwilling or unable to provide a child with adequate care and protection, it is the responsibility of the Government to ensure that the child's care and protection is provided for
- government intrusion into family life should be the least intrusive that is consistent with the best interests of the child or young person.

Supporting family participation in local communities is important. Interaction with other children and families helps young children to learn to get along with others and to be a member of a group. Families also receive benefits by having other people to talk to, to share concerns with, and to get encouragement and support.

The Government is working closely with local government authorities to promote a stronger focus on inclusion of vulnerable children, young people and families in their local communities. The Best Start initiative and Municipal Early Years Plans, for example, provide opportunities for local agencies, professionals and community members to work together to create positive environments for vulnerable children and their families during early childhood and to tailor universal early years services to meet local needs.

Secondary child, youth and family services also help to build stronger and more nurturing communities. Cooperation between these secondary services and local government authorities will be assisted by the redesign of local service networks.

Participation of vulnerable families in local communities also affects broader social and economic goals set by the Government in *Growing Victoria Together*. Communities where everyone feels included are more healthy, vibrant, diverse and productive. They provide a network of support for vulnerable groups. A *Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage* reported that where communities have similar socioeconomic levels, those with greater levels of community involvement achieve more positive results for children and young people – reflected in higher school retention rates and lower rates of crime.

Conversely, social exclusion causes divisions within society and generates higher costs for the wider community in areas such as crime, poor health and family breakdown. Social exclusion can contribute to intergenerational patterns of disadvantage, with long-term effects for the economy, and society more broadly.

The Government has established a range of initiatives to build stronger communities. Community capacity-building initiatives and initiatives such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Program are helping to build stronger and more positive ties within local communities to generate important networks of support. Neighbourhood Renewal projects, for example, give residents in disadvantaged communities the opportunity to plan the renewal and upgrading of their homes and streets. Unemployed residents carry out much of the work through a community jobs program, which has also benefited many participants by assisting them to go on to further employment or training.



Action 2.2

The Department of Human Services will set out clear measures for vulnerable families in:

- the quality framework for early years services
- the quality framework for child, youth and family services.

Action 2.3

The Government will monitor progress in strengthening communities through *Growing Victoria Together* reporting.

Strategy 2.1: Defining and measuring outcomes

Clear measures will also be developed to enable the service system to monitor whether services are making a positive difference to the lives of vulnerable families. These measures will be developed and communicated through the quality framework for early years services and the quality framework for child, youth and family services, described under Strategy 1.

These processes will supplement *Growing Victoria Together* processes, through which government reports on progress in improving the quality of life for all Victorians and their communities. At a whole-of-government level, the Government will monitor progress in:

- increasing an appreciation of diversity in neighbourhoods and communities
- increasing the extent and diversity of participation in community, cultural and recreational organisations
- more Victorians being able to get help from friends, family or neighbours when they need it.



Action 3.1

The Department of Human Services will work with non-government child, youth and family services to develop a Family and Placement Services Sector Development Plan.

Action 3.2

The Sector Development Plan will spell out measures to support:

- better-integrated child, youth and family services
- earlier intervention and prevention
- diverting children, young people and families from Child Protection.

All 74 White Paper Actions are tabulated in Appendix 4.

Strategy 3: Establishing an integrated child, youth and family service system

The goals and objectives of child, youth and family services will always be defined on the basis of the characteristics and needs of their clients.

The quality of individual services is critical to improving the lives of vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families.

A major reform priority for the Victorian Government is to build a more integrated child, youth and family service system. This will involve significant work culture and work practice change.

The Government will work collaboratively within a partnership framework with child, youth and family services to monitor progress in:

- building a stronger focus on children and young people's outcomes in the design and delivery of services
- increasing inclusion and tailoring of services to address the needs of vulnerable groups and communities
- strengthening the collaboration and integration between primary, secondary and tertiary service responses to child and family needs
- increasing coordination of effort with other local services that contribute to children and young people's healthy development and help to overcome disadvantage.

Important indicators that a more integrated service is working effectively and responding to the more complex needs of vulnerable groups will include:

- participation of vulnerable children, vulnerable young people and their families in universal services
- reduced penetration into other tertiary services (notably Child Protection and Youth Justice).

Through the Family and Placement Services Sector Development Plan, the Department of Human services will work with community-based child, youth and family services to:

- further develop and articulate the specific goals and performance measures of child, youth and family services
- ensure that these performance measures are evidence-based
- build a shared understanding of how objectives and measures relating to the overall performance of the service system link to the more specific measures relating to vulnerable children, vulnerable young people and their families (as communicated in the Statewide Plan, the quality framework for early years services, the quality framework for child, youth and family services, the quality framework for youth justice, the vulnerable youth framework, and the charters for Aboriginal children's well-being and for children in care).



part 2

Changes in service delivery: creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage

A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage set out the Victorian Government's framework for creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage.

The Department of Human Services will lead the implementation of this framework as it applies to vulnerable children, young people and families.

Actions will lead to:

- greater inclusion of vulnerable children, young people and families in services and supports
- earlier intervention to provide families with appropriate and sustained services and supports through diversion to community-based services
- more integrated universal, secondary and tertiary child, youth and family services
- new approaches to improving children's stability
- specific assistance to priority population groups, including Aboriginal children and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young people in out-of-home care, young people involved with youth justice, and young people and children with a disability.

See the glossary at the end of this White Paper for definitions of unusual terms.



Context of Part 2

Part 2 explores what a stronger focus on outcomes will mean for service delivery.

A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage provides a framework for changes to the way services are delivered in Victoria in order to tackle disadvantage and improve opportunities for all Victorians to fully participate in the State's economic and social life. That framework recognised that additional social investment alone will not be sufficient to achieve these goals. Tackling disadvantage must also involve fundamental reform.

A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage framework promotes the following directions for reform:

- ensuring that universal services provide equal opportunity for all
- reducing barriers to opportunity through earlier intervention and prevention
- providing better coordinated and more localised services
- targeting assistance to disadvantaged groups and providing support to the highest areas of risk
- involving communities in decision-making and making it easier to work with the Government.

These directions are consistent with reforms that are already underway to strengthen the delivery of child, youth and family services in Victoria. Traditionally, in Victoria, child, youth, and family services have operated on the basis of separating protection services from welfare services. We now know that this approach is inadequate.

Over the past 20 years, family structures have changed, problems encountered by families have become more complex, and knowledge about the critical factors in children's development has increased.

Since 1999, the Government has invested in a broader service model to better protect and care for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people in Victoria. The primary focus of reforms over the past five years has been on strengthening earlier intervention and prevention.

Universal, secondary and tertiary services all play a critical role in promoting positive outcomes for children, young people and families, and the prevention of harm. In reporting on its consultations about future policy and legislative reform, the Kirby panel described the relationship between these different tiers of service delivery:

The system must support a range of approaches that deal with needs, risks and harms. For universal services, the primary focus of service delivery is on families and their needs. For tertiary services, the primary focus is on children and risks or harms to them. The two perspectives intersect and co-exist throughout the service system. In other words, both need and risk are considered alongside one another at all tiers, though with different emphases. All services have a responsibility to protect children and promote their well-being. (Freiberg, Kirby & Ward, 2004)

An integrated service system, which shares responsibility for the protection and well-being of children and young people, is at the heart of the Government's new policy framework for vulnerable children and young people.

Within a more integrated service system:

- secondary child, youth and family services and Child Protection will work together to provide positive assistance that can help families avoid major problems in the future
- Child Protection will retain specialist functions when children or young people are in need of protection, but will be better-integrated with community-based child, youth and family services
- better information-sharing and consultation between secondary child, youth and family services will help to identify accumulated harm to children and young people and assist in ensuring families receive appropriate services and supports
- strong networks of services will join up service responses at a local level and promote shared responsibility for children and young people's well-being and safety among services such as education, mental health, drug and alcohol, and disability and housing services.

Priorities for Child Protection will include:

- reducing penetration into Child Protection and the transfer between generations of those factors that place children and young people at risk of harm
- ensuring greater stability for children and young people who cannot live safely at home to better promote their healthy development.

Child Protection and community-based child, youth and family services will work together to better meet the specific needs of priority population groups, including:

- Aboriginal children and Aboriginal young people, who are significantly over-represented in Child Protection and out-of-home care services, but have reduced access to universal secondary services
- families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who may find it difficult to engage in local services and supports
- children and young people with a disability
- those children and young people who are in the care of the State
- young people involved with Youth Justice.

Specific strategies described in Part 2 are summarised in Figure 5.

*Figure 4
Changes in service delivery: creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage,
Strategies 4 to 9*



Some of these strategies contain sub-strategies as follows:

Strategy 5 contains three sub-strategies:

- 5.1** Earlier intervention through community-based referral and service intake points.
- 5.2** Child Protection's role in supporting intervention and prevention.
- 5.3** Specialist functions of Child Protection.

Strategy 7 contains six sub-strategies:

- 7.1** Improved stability for children and young people in Child Protection and out-of-home care.
- 7.2** Aboriginal children, young people and families.
- 7.3** Children, young people and families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
- 7.4** Young people involved in the youth justice system.
- 7.5** Young people in out-of-home care.
- 7.6** Children with a disability.

Strategy 4: Ensuring that universal services provide equal opportunity for all

All children, young people and families gain benefits from access to high quality universal health, education and community services. Participation in activities as varied as immunisation programs, kindergarten, school education, and local community groups support health, learning and development. They provide opportunities to build positive relationships with other children and adults.

As well as directly supporting children and young people's development and well-being, these universal services are well placed to link children, young people and families into more targeted services and supports.

Breaking Cycles, Building Futures Report - promoting inclusion of vulnerable families in antenatal and universal early childhood services (Department of Human Services, 2004a) emphasises the importance of:

- supporting parents to overcome their practical difficulties in accessing universal services
- building positive and affirming relationships with parents, which counteract distrust and stigma, and assist parents to connect with others
- establishing strong reciprocal links with other services targeted to vulnerable families.

The *Breaking Cycles, Building Futures* report reinforces the importance of planning across service systems and a whole-of-government approach in promoting the inclusion of vulnerable families, and better coordination of service responses.

The establishment of the Office for Children strengthens the critical linkages between universal services, secondary child, youth and family services, and Child Protection.

The ability of services to develop integrated and collaborative approaches to service delivery across the universal and secondary and tertiary sectors is a key feature of the Best Start and Family Support Innovation Projects. While the universal sector provides appropriate support to most families, the complex and chronic nature of the problems confronting more vulnerable families requires coordination of a range of services across the child, youth and family service system, as well as adult services, for example family violence, substance abuse, mental health and housing supports.

The Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Service is funded by the Government to assertively respond to children and families at risk of poor outcomes, in particular those children for whom there are multiple risk factors or indications of a significant level of risk. This service provides a more intensive level of in-home family support than is available through universal services. The maternal and child health nurse will often have had previous contact with families and is able to make an assessment of the need for more targeted support. The service is a critical part of a continuum of services between universal, secondary and tertiary services, and as such is a key partner in the delivery of Family Support Innovation Projects.

Municipal Early Years Plans provide an important vehicle for guiding local service development and investment in local work to improve children's health and well-being. They also identify local strategies for greater inclusion of vulnerable families and groups in early years services, and opportunities for improved collaboration with secondary and tertiary sectors. The Municipal Early Years Plans will contribute to informing the development of the Statewide Plan for Children.

In addition, the new Victorian Children's Council will monitor that Statewide policy, and service delivery maximises positive outcomes for all children, including vulnerable children.

A coordinated approach to planning at all levels – State, regional and local – will guide the development of models of inclusion and support for vulnerable children in universal services and secondary child, youth and family services, and inform effective investment in the futures of vulnerable children.

The life-chances of vulnerable children will not improve without greater coordination of supports for their parents. To this end, Victoria is establishing an integrated continuum of services featuring cross-sectorial collaboration to provide the most effective mix of services to families across the universal, secondary and the tertiary sectors.



Community-based referral and service intake points provide an opportunity to engage vulnerable families in services and supports before they reach a crisis.

Stronger partnership arrangements will be built between Child Protection and child, youth and family support services to move away from episodic short-term interventions to an approach that sustains positive changes in vulnerable families.

Strategy 5: Reducing barriers to opportunity, including through earlier intervention and prevention

Strategy 5.1: Earlier intervention through community-based referral and service intake points

Service responses to vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families have been influenced by our knowledge of the increasing complexity of problems experienced by vulnerable families in today's society.

The *Integrated Strategy for Child Protection and Out-Of-Home Care Services* (Department of Human Services, 2002b) demonstrated that more and more frequently the families coming into contact with Child Protection have combinations of long-term poverty, substance abuse, mental health conditions, disability and family violence.

Between 1995 and 2001, the proportion of parents involved with Child Protection with one or more of these characteristics grew from 40 per cent to more than 70 per cent. The proportion with two or more of these characteristics rose from 9 per cent to 44 per cent.

Child Protection provides a highly visible point of contact for people to raise concerns about vulnerable children and vulnerable young people. Often, these concerns do not meet the threshold for Child Protection involvement (the determination that a child or young person is in need of protection). Only about 13,000 of the 37,000 notifications per year are directly visited (that is, the family is 'visited' and a 'caution' is given).

Historically, where Child Protection did not become directly involved following receipt of a notification, there were only very limited mechanisms for following up to ensure that a family was engaged in appropriate services.

Over the past three years, the Government has initiated new service responses, based on closer cooperation between Child Protection and child, youth and family services. The Family Support Innovation Projects have targeted those families cycling in and out of Child Protection, to intervene earlier and support those families in the community.

The major features of the projects are:

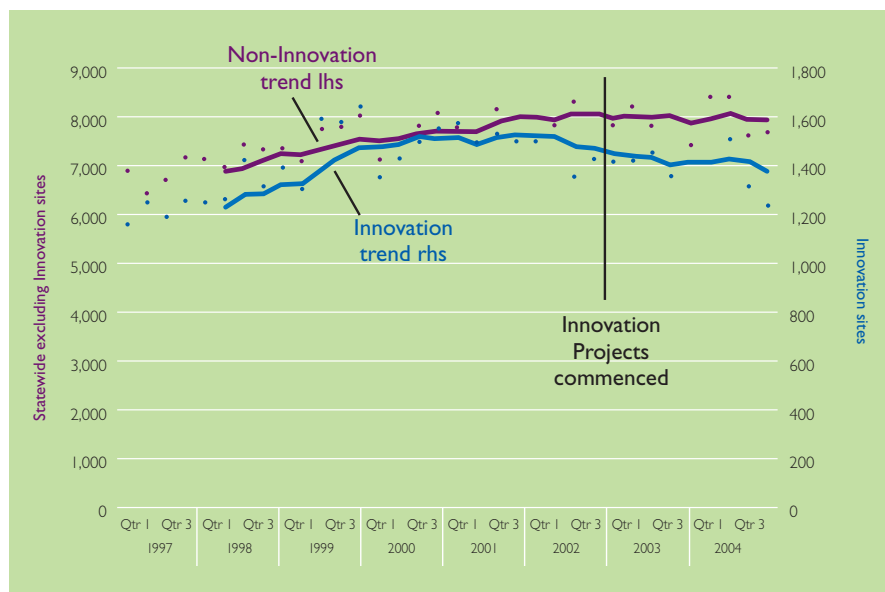
- the creation of common intake and referral arrangements on a local sub-regional basis, which establish a single, well-known and accessible entry point into secondary child, youth and family services. These intake and referral arrangements are described as 'community-based intake and referral services'
- openness with families about the decision to refer and/or a referral having been received by community-based intake, as a means of engaging families to work willingly with support services
- provision of timely and sustained support appropriate to the complexity of family needs and the level of risk to children and young people
- services that proactively encourage families to access local services and supports before they reach a crisis, to prevent a more intrusive and expensive Child Protection involvement
- stronger linkages between secondary child, youth and family services and the broader health and community services infrastructure (including early childhood services, education, drug and alcohol, disability, mental health, health and housing services, and police).

An interim evaluation of the Family Support Innovation Projects has demonstrated a reduction in notifications to Child Protection, with family support services effectively managing families.

Figures 5 and 6 show the aggregated rates of notifications and renotifications for the six year-one project locations (Innovation sites) compared to non-Innovation sites in the rest of Victoria.

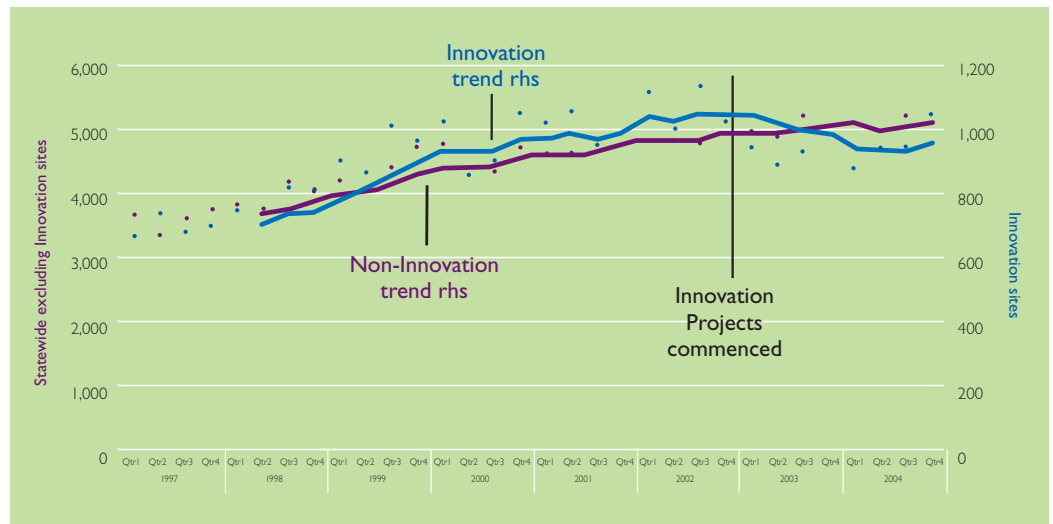
Firstly, Figure 5 shows that notifications have stabilised in Innovation sites, while continuing to rise in non-Innovation sites:

*Figure 5
Trends in notification and renotification rates in Victoria. Innovation project sites compared with the rest of the State: Notifications per quarter*



Secondly, Figure 6 illustrates the same trend in relation to renotification rates.

*Figure 6
Trends in notification and renotification rates in Victoria. Innovation project sites compared with the rest of the State: Renotifications per quarter*

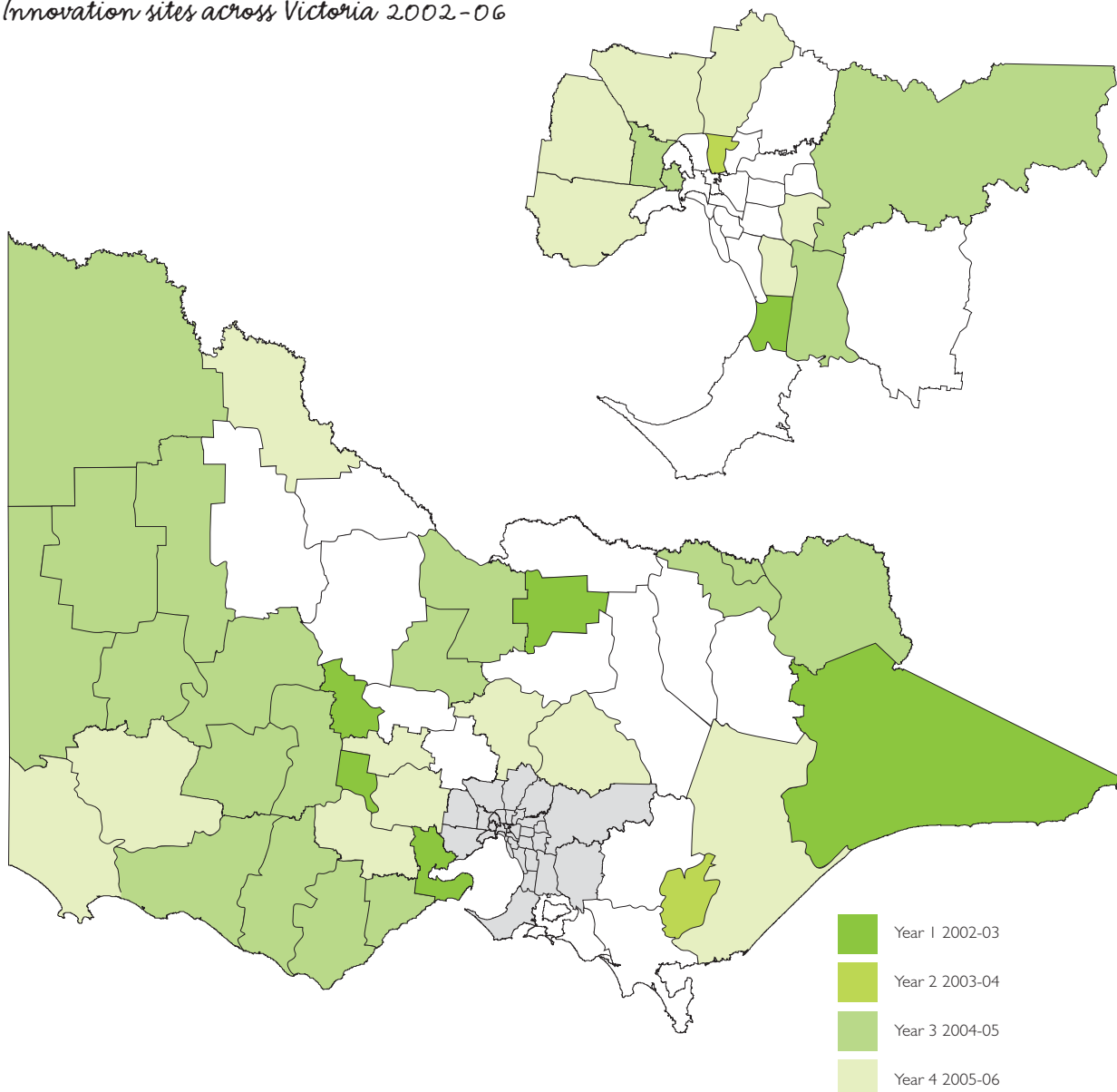


Next steps in strengthening earlier intervention and prevention in Victoria

The Family Support Innovation Projects were initially established as pilots, but community-based intake and referral services will be funded recurrently and will continue to be rolled out across the State.

New funds provided in the 2005-06 budget will extend this service model to 44 local government areas that account for just under 62 per cent of notifications received Statewide each year, as illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7
Innovation sites across Victoria 2002-06



Action 5.1

The Department of Human Services will work in partnership with secondary child, youth and family services to establish community-based intake and referral services across Victoria.

This phased roll-out of community-based intake and referral services will continue into the future. Funding provided by government to secondary child, youth and family services will be for services that are targeted at those vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families who are experiencing difficulties and are at risk of becoming involved with Child Protection if problems are not addressed.

The *Children's Bill* sets out a legal framework for secondary services, and:

- describes the threshold for intake into a community intake and referral service (the determination that there are concerns about the well-being of a child or young person)
- authorises secondary services registered by the Secretary to receive reports where there are concerns about the well-being of a child or young person
- authorises these registered secondary services to share information with other registered child, youth and family services involved in the common intake and referral arrangement
- authorises registered secondary services to share information with other local services (for example, police, mental health services, drug and alcohol services, Child Protection and schools) for the purposes of coordinating the matter of who should engage the family and risk assessment and to report criminal activity to police. It is intended that ongoing coordination of service delivery will occur with the consent of the family. More detail on new information sharing arrangements is provided at sub-strategy 14.2.

Any member of the public can make a report to a community-based intake and referral service. Professionals can also make referrals. Reporters and referrers will receive the same protections as a notifier to Child Protection currently receives under the *Children and Young Persons Act*. Reporters will be able to waive their right to remain anonymous, to assist in engaging families in services and supports. Openness with families about the receipt of a referral by a community-based intake and referral service will be promoted as best practice to engage families to work willingly with secondary services.

New protocols will be developed between community-based intake and referral services and Victoria Police. These protocols will address the disclosure of information from Victoria Police to community-based intake and referral services in order to assist in risk assessments. The protocols will also spell out the responsibilities of secondary services to report criminal activities to the police.

As the projects are implemented as a Statewide service model, community-based intake and referral points will continue to operate on a sub-regional basis. A feature of the Family Support Innovation Projects has been the ability for secondary service providers in partnership with departmental regions to determine an appropriate model for intake and referral arrangements. This flexibility will be retained to take account of local needs, existing service arrangements and service catchment areas. For example, intake services may be operated by a lead agency, or through a consortia of local secondary services. The community-based intake and referral service will be highly visible and responsive, capable of managing demand for support services in the local area and ensuring that vulnerable families receive support in a timely manner.

Action 5.2

The Department of Human Services will work with secondary child, youth and family services to develop a decision-making tool for use in all new community-based intake and referral services and by Child Protection. This will provide a first step in developing a more comprehensive common risk and needs assessment framework to ensure consistent decision-making across Child Protection and community child, youth and family services.

Action 5.3

The *Children's Bill* makes the Secretary responsible for working with community services to promote the development of common policies on risk and needs assessment for vulnerable children, young people and families.

A common assessment framework will be developed to ensure consistent decision-making across Child Protection and secondary child, youth and family services. This assessment framework will build on the Victorian Risk Framework. The first step towards a common assessment framework will be the development of a new decision-making tool for all intakes into secondary services and Child Protection. Child Protection and funded services will be required to adopt this tool.

The Family Support Innovation Projects have already introduced community and professional education strategies in local government areas that have projects in place. These strategies will provide a platform for building understanding among professionals about thresholds for intervention by community-based intakes and Child Protection across Victoria, as community-based assessment and referral arrangements are implemented as a Statewide service model.

Importantly, local service networks will be redesigned to better coordinate community-based services (including education, health, mental health, disability, justice, drug and alcohol, family violence and housing services) and to provide sustained support to vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families. Strategies to better link secondary child, youth and family services with the broader health and community services infrastructure in their local area are discussed in Strategy 6 of this White Paper.



The threshold for intake into Child Protection will continue to be that a child is in need of protection

Child Protection will receive reports and classify them according to need and risk.

Action 5.4

The *Children's Bill* provides for Child Protection to assess reports and either:

- classify the report as a notification and investigate it
- provide advice or consultation to support a professional or service provider working with a family
- refer a report to a community-based intake for appropriate assistance.

Strategy 5.2: Child Protection's role in supporting earlier intervention and prevention

Establishing clearer points of entry into secondary child, youth and family services across Victoria will make an important difference in providing positive assistance to vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families.

There is also a need to establish clear mechanisms to refer cases from Child Protection to secondary child, youth and family services when a report is made to Child Protection. Cooperation between secondary services and Child Protection is important to ensure the follow-up takes place, is sustained, or is successful.

In addition, Child Protection can provide valuable advice and support to secondary child, youth and family services as they undertake risk assessments and make decisions about how best to work with more complex families.

More effective information-sharing between secondary services and Child Protection will support earlier identification of accumulating harm to children and young people.

As noted in the previous strategy, the Family Service Innovation Projects are modelled on stronger partnerships between secondary child, youth and family services and Child Protection. Even with these projects in place, the *Children and Young Persons Act* has impeded effective integration of secondary services and Child Protection.

Every report to Child Protection must be treated as a notification (whether or not this is appropriate) and investigated. Child Protection is not authorised to provide consultation and advice; it can only disclose information for the purposes of conducting its investigation.

The *Children's Bill* will enable Child Protection to better support earlier intervention and prevention, while also targeting its own intake arrangements to those children and young people in need of protection.

The Bill will authorise Child Protection to receive reports and assess them according to need and risk.

This means that:

- Some reports will be classified as notifications, in which case the Bill will provide that they must be investigated. Families will be informed of the report as part of the investigation.
- In other cases, Child Protection may provide advice or consultation to a professional or a service provider.²
- Child Protection may also respond to a report by referring it to a community-based intake for appropriate assistance.

New positions have been created within Child Protection to establish effective systems and processes for supporting community-based intake and referral services. These positions will help to promote a culture and focus on community partnerships within Child Protection. The positions will develop structured approaches to providing consultations, as well as coordinated case planning and joint risk assessments, where appropriate. Innovative approaches to strengthening relationships between secondary services and Child Protection include a pilot in Colac Otway, whereby a Child Protection team is being co-located with the community-based intake and referral service, and family services program.

² The Bill will require Child Protection to keep a record of all consultations. If a secondary child, youth or family service consults with Child Protection, the Bill will also require records to be kept by both the agency and Child Protection.

Universal, secondary and Child Protection services all have a preventative role.

Child Protection can help to prevent:

- **further harm to children and young people**
- **further penetration into Child Protection and other tertiary services**
- **the inter-generational transmission of factors which place children and young people at risk of harm**

Strategy 5.3: Specialist functions of Child Protection

In general, the Victorian child protection system is designed to be a highly targeted system that identifies and responds to children at immediate and substantial risk. The system is based on discrete episodes: notify, investigate, intervene or close. However, a large number of cases are re-notifications, resulting in re-assessments and re-referrals. The previous strategy set out actions to better integrate Child Protection with secondary child, youth and family services, in order to divert families away from Child Protection and ensure they receive appropriate services and supports.

In some cases, children and young people are at risk of significant harm that cannot be addressed through less intrusive support by secondary services. Sustained involvement from Child Protection is required.

This strategy describes reforms to Child Protection to improve responses to serious and often chronic problems faced by some families and to ensure that children and young people are protected and nurtured to adulthood.

Child Protection interventions

Most often, Child Protection's intervention involves helping families to plan the actions that need to be taken to improve parenting skills or address problems that are placing their children at risk of harm.

In a much smaller proportion of cases, greater intrusion into family life is required and children cannot remain safely at home. Around six per cent of notifications each year result in a protection application to the Children's Court.

Where Child Protection receives a notification and substantiates that a child is in need of protection, Child Protection plays an important preventative role by:

- preventing harm, or further harm, to the child or young person
- diverting families, where appropriate, from further Child Protection involvement
- helping to prevent the intergenerational transfer of the types of factors that create risk of harm.

Over the past five years, the Government has implemented new initiatives to strengthen Child Protection's diversionary role. For example, Finding Solutions is a mediation program designed to engage rapidly with young people and their families, at the point of notification to Child Protection to divert them from further involvement in the Child Protection and placement system. The program provides mediation and support that helps address the issues leading to potential family breakdown.

Assertive outreach is used to engage young people and their families, to assess their issues and needs, and to provide support that assists them to identify and resolve behaviours and/or issues that are placing a relationship at risk of breakdown. The support provided aims to ease tension in the family without severing links or reducing parents' capacity to care for the young person.

Action 5.5

The *Children's Bill* provides for a new temporary assessment order. This court order would enable Child Protection to investigate notifications more thoroughly, where parents will not cooperate.

Action 5.6

In order to assist vulnerable mothers to provide adequate care, the Bill enables Child Protection to receive reports about unborn children who are likely to be at risk of harm after they are born.

Action 5.7

On receipt of a report on an unborn child, Child Protection will work with health and community services to plan appropriate services and supports for the mother to reduce risks to the child after its birth.

The next steps in strengthening Child Protection's specialist functions will include:

- identifying and responding to patterns of accumulated harm earlier, rather than only where there is a crisis
- creating more flexibility to work more intensively with families so as to prevent them penetrating deeper into the Child Protection system
- placing children and young people's best interests at the heart of all decision-making, to combine a strong focus on safety, and with more proactive attention to children and young people's social, emotional, intellectual and physical development
- for those children and young people who cannot live at home with their birth parents, ensuring timely decision-making about stable, longer-term care arrangements
- continuing to strengthen out-of-home care services to support children and young people to address the effects of abuse and neglect
- boosting the use of programs such as Aboriginal family decision-making, Aboriginal family preservation, and the new family restoration initiative.

Actions are set out throughout this White Paper to strengthen a focus on children and young people's best interests (Strategy 10) and stability (Strategy 7.1) and to strengthen out-of-home care (Strategy 7.5).

Any intrusion into family life by Child Protection must be authorised under its legislation. In order to ensure that Child Protection is able to protect children and young people from harm and promote their well-being and development, the *Children's Bill* proposes a range of new legislative measures:

Temporary assessment orders

The Children's Court will be able to make an order strengthening Child Protection's investigation powers where there are grounds for suspecting that a child or young person may be in need of protection, but where families are refusing to cooperate with an investigation. The court order will enable adequate assessment of whether there is a risk of significant harm, leading to intervention where appropriate.

The Ombudsman has called for legislative reform to strengthen Child Protection investigation powers in recent annual reports. This reform will bring Victoria in line with other jurisdictions across Australia.

The capacity to receive reports about unborn babies

The Bill will enable Child Protection to receive reports about unborn children where there are concerns that the baby is likely to be in need of protection once born. For example, a hospital may contact Child Protection, indicating that an expectant mother has a serious drug problem that is likely to place a newborn infant at risk, or the mother has an intellectual disability and does not appear to have sufficient supports.

Child Protection's role will be to work with health and community services to plan appropriate services and supports. The protective worker will be required to record the report, but as is the case now, none of Child Protection's statutory powers will apply until after the birth.

Action 5.8

The Bill will also create a new pathway into treatment for children aged ten to 14 years who exhibit serious sexual behaviour. Under new provisions:

- Child Protection will be able to bring an application to the Court, under a new protective ground and
- the Children's Court will be able to direct treatment (and placement away from home for the purposes of treatment).

Action 5.9

The *Children's Bill* will enable the Criminal Division of the Children's Court to refer a matter to Child Protection.

A new protective ground for children exhibiting sexually abusive behaviour

There is considerable evidence that intervening early with young people exhibiting sexually abusive behaviour can help to prevent ongoing and more serious sexual offences. At present, the Criminal Division of the Children's Court may direct treatment as part of sentencing, where a young person is convicted of a sexual offence. Many treatment programs can only be accessed following an admission or conviction. However, for children aged 10 to 14 it is often difficult to prove that the requisite mental intent exists to secure a conviction. Lawyers generally advise their clients not to obtain treatment voluntarily because of potential issues of self-incrimination, and also resulting legal professional misconduct possibilities.

Proposed reforms will provide an alternative pathway into treatment when the young person does not voluntarily seek help, without relying on a conviction.

Under proposed reforms, the Children's Court would be able to direct treatment for children aged 10 to 14 exhibiting sexually abusive behaviours, following an application from Child Protection.

The *Children's Bill* sets out this new ground for protective intervention, limiting its application to children aged 10 to 14 who exhibit sexually abusive behaviour:

Any professional or other member of the public will be able to make report concerns about a young person's sexual behaviour to Child Protection. Child Protection may also receive referrals from the Criminal Division of the Children's Court.

Where the protective intervenor assesses that a child or young person is in need of therapeutic treatment, an application will be made to the Children's Court. The Bill creates a new court order; to direct the child or young person to engage in treatment. The Bill also enables the Children's Court to make a placement order when a child is found to be in need of therapeutic treatment. This order will allow the child to be placed away from home where this is necessary to carry out treatment. The placement order will only apply for the duration of the treatment order. If the young person does not complete treatment, the treatment order and any related placement order will be revoked.

There is no consistent definition of sexually abusive behaviour. A range of sexual behaviours may be defined as abusive where a person uses power, force or authority to involve a child, young person or adult in any form of unwanted or illegal sexual activity. Illegal sexual activities are those offences as described in the *Crimes Act 1958*. It is important to recognise that not all sexual behaviour between children or young people is abusive.

Assessing the age or developmental differences between the children/young people in question, and the use of coercion, whether physical (force) or emotional (power and authority), and the context of the behaviour, are all necessary in order to determine whether the behaviour is abusive or not.

Action 5.10

The *Children's Bill* also requires the establishment of a Therapeutic Treatment Board to advise the Secretary of the Department of Human Services and the Director for Public Prosecutions on:

- whether a child has exhibited sexually abusive behaviour
- whether a criminal or protective intervention is appropriate.

In order to assist Child Protection to assess whether a child or young person's sexual behaviour is abusive, the *Children's Bill* will require the establishment of a new multidisciplinary Therapeutic Treatment Board. Child Protection, Victoria Police, the Office for Public Prosecutions and treatment providers will be represented on this board, which will:

- determine workable definitions of 'sexually abusive behaviour'
- where necessary, advise the Secretary of the Department of Human Services on whether reported behaviour fits within this definition
- where a protective or criminal justice response may be appropriate, provide advice to the Secretary of the Department of Human Services on whether a protection application should be made to the Children's Court.

The board's role will be advisory. Final decisions on whether to pursue criminal justice and protective actions will remain with the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Secretary. As noted above, the making of a treatment order will always be the decision of the Children's Court.

The Department of Human Services will work with treatment agencies to assess the current capacity to meet demand resulting from the introduction of therapeutic treatment orders.

Action 5.11

The Department of Human Services will work with treatment agencies to assess the current capacity to meet demand resulting from the introduction of therapeutic treatment orders.

All 74 White Paper Actions are tabulated in Appendix 4.



Strategy 6: Providing coordinated services that better meet local needs

Recent research has shown the importance of effective communication and cooperation between child, youth and family services and the broader health and community services infrastructure. As family problems have become more complex, a broad range of services will impact on family functioning and the well-being and safety of children and young people. For example:

- around 18 per cent of clients in home-based care and 38 per cent of clients in residential care are diagnosed with mental health problems
- more than 50 per cent of children and young people at risk of serious harm come from families that experience domestic violence, and over 30 per cent of vulnerable families have substance abuse problems (Department of Human Services, 2005a).
- schools play a central role in the development of children and young people, and in strengthening communities
- vulnerable children and vulnerable young people, especially those growing up in out-of-home care, participate less in education than other children and often have significantly poorer educational outcomes.

In its recent social policy statement, *A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage*, the Government committed to developing more integrated approaches to service delivery at critical transition points in the lives of children and young people. Specifically, the Government will encourage cooperation between the child, youth and family sectors, the education sector, and other human services:

- during early childhood, when development needs are high
- when young people are at risk of disengagement from education and training opportunities
- when families are in crisis and experiencing breakdown and violence.

As well as matching services to local needs, the coordination of policies, programs and services is significant, particularly where more complex needs are involved.

Vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families often come into contact with large numbers of services and government agencies, which can be overwhelming. At the same time, clearer pathways between local services and supports would help to prevent families falling through the cracks.

Many of the services provided to children, young people and families are funded or delivered through the Department of Human Services. The department is seeking to build a stronger culture and environment for responsive and coordinated service responses by building a stronger place-based culture in service delivery, and streamlining administrative requirements across programs.

Specific actions to improve collaboration between secondary child, youth and family services, Child Protection, and the broader health and community services infrastructure include:

Action 6.1

The Department of Human Services will work with secondary child, youth and family services to align catchment areas for community-based intake and referral services with Child Protection and other place-based initiatives (such as Primary Care Partnerships), wherever this is appropriate.

Action 6.2

The Department of Human Services will work with secondary child, youth and family services to develop consistent tools for referring families between services. To the greatest extent possible, new referral tools will be compatible with referral tools used by other health and community services.

Action 6.3

The Department of Human Services will continue to explore more flexible funding models to enable local child, youth and family services to work together and more intensively with families.

Better aligning geographic boundaries for programs that have common clients

The Department of Human Services is working with secondary child, youth and family services to review catchment boundaries for community-based intake and referral services and Child Protection. Catchment areas for Family Support Innovation Projects and Child Protection are being restructured to ensure catchment areas are aligned. This will be a key principle of all new community-based intake and referral services.

Opportunities are also being identified to align these service boundaries with other place-based initiatives, such as Primary Care Partnerships and neighbourhood renewal services. Aligning of catchment areas will not be compulsory. Specific place-based initiatives focus on different population groups (for example, a Neighbourhood Renewal project may target older Victorians). Catchment areas will also be influenced by the distribution of relevant services. As a result, it may not always be appropriate to align community-based intake and referral services and Child Protection with other place-based initiatives.

Developing compatible referral tools

Coordination of service delivery will also be supported by the development of common referral tools; that is, tools which are compatible with referral tools used by other health and community services. Primary Care Partnership referral tools and templates, for example, may provide a basis for new, consistent referral tools for secondary services and Child Protection.

Collaborative approaches to case planning and case management

Communities around Victoria are already adopting innovative approaches to more inclusive case management meetings, as a means of driving better coordination of care. Local secondary services work together to manage caseloads. As noted in Strategy 5.1, the *Children's Bill* specifically authorises disclosures between secondary services and Child Protection, which will support collaborative approaches to case planning and case management.

The Family Support Innovation Projects have also begun to explore more flexible funding models to help local child, youth and family services to work together and more intensively with families.

Action 6.4

The Department of Human Services will ensure that up-to-date and effective protocols are in place to protect children and young people and to promote their health, learning well-being and development.

Action 6.5

The Department of Human Services will also assist secondary child, youth and family services to develop effective protocols, as appropriate.

Strategic use of protocols

Protocols are another mechanism that government will continue to use to strengthen cooperation and coordination of service responses.

A number of protocols already exist between Child Protection and other services to support closer cooperation and effective information sharing. Protocols are monitored and updated to ensure they remain effective and meet contemporary needs. For example, protocols are currently being renegotiated with the Family Court, the Coroner's Court, and the Royal Children's Hospital.

Other important protocols exist between Child Protection and:

- Victoria Police
- universal child, youth and family services
- agencies, including Commonwealth agencies, which work with unsupported, homeless and at-risk young people
- drug treatment services, with a strong focus on services working with parents with alcohol and drug issues
- mental health services
- Kids Help Line
- Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
- Department of Education and Training
- Victorian schools
- Youth Justice.

The Department of Human Services will also assist community-based intake and referral services in identifying and developing appropriate protocols to support the operation of this new intake service. Relevant services may include Victoria Police, universal child, youth and family services, other health and community services, Victorian schools, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and culturally and linguistically diverse peak bodies.

Redesigning local service networks

Responding effectively to the complex and diverse needs of vulnerable families requires a network of locally coordinated, community-based services, delivering an integrated service response. These networks need to involve early years services, secondary child, youth and family services, protection, health, mental health, drug and alcohol, housing, police and education services.

Networks have been established across Victoria to build stronger links between child, youth and family services and the broader service systems. The evaluation of the Family Support Innovation Projects highlighted that the participation of education, police, health and community services in the networks varies across the State. Barriers to participation identified in the evaluation included:

- uncertainty about what information can be shared
- differences in individual agencies' working culture
- inconsistent funding, accountability and performance requirements
- different services being focused on individual clients without recognising the role of the family.

Education, health and community services all contribute to children and young people's safety, health, learning, development and well-being.

Local service networks will be redesigned so that these services work together more effectively.

Action 6.6

The Department of Human Services will establish indicators, in the child, youth and family services quality framework, to monitor progress in redesigning local service networks.

Action 6.7

Regional positions will be created within the Department of Human Services to support closer relationships between community-based intake and referral services and Child Protection. These positions will also help to support and drive the redesign of local service networks.

These networks need to be redesigned and take greater responsibility for:

- assessing the needs of vulnerable children, young people and families in a local area
- aligning service planning and development
- strengthening referral processes between services
- coordinating case planning and case management.

New measures will be established in the child, youth and family services quality framework, discussed under Strategy 1, to enable the service system to monitor progress in redesigning local service networks.

Aligning geographic boundaries, developing compatible referral tools and clarifying information-sharing arrangements through new legislation will all make it easier for local services to work together. The Department of Human Services is examining opportunities to streamline administrative requirements on agencies so that reporting requirements do not impede collaboration. The department is also seeking to establish service coordination for vulnerable groups as a core responsibility within service agreements.

Cultural change is also required to build greater shared responsibility among adult services such as mental health, drug and alcohol and family violence services for vulnerable children's well-being and safety. At a minimum, this responsibility involves being aware of the impact of service provision on family functioning and making contact with child, youth and family services where there are concerns about a child's well-being or there is a risk of harm.

Regional positions created to support closer relationships between community-based intake and referral services and Child Protection (described in Strategy 5) will also help drive the redesign of local service networks. For example, these positions may support service networks in undertaking joint planning and in identifying barriers and additional opportunities to strengthen service coordination.

One of the responsibilities of these new positions will be to assist local service networks targeted at children, young people and families to identify and work closely with other mechanisms for service integration. For example, strong relationships should be built with family violence networks. Over the past five-and-a-half years, 55 per cent of children requiring out-of-home care had a family history that included family violence. Close working relationships between these networks will provide important opportunities to cooperate on planning, service development and service responses to families experiencing or at risk of family violence (Department of Human Services, 2005b).

Government will establish indicators that measure the effectiveness of network arrangements in improving service integration and in making a difference in the lives of vulnerable children, vulnerable young people, and their families.

Improving children and young people's stability is a major priority of the legislative reforms.

The goal is to keep children and young people with their families, if this is in their best interests.

When this is not in their best interests, children and young people need stable out-of-home care to assure their healthy development.

Strategy 7: Targeting assistance to priority populations and the highest areas of risk

Strategy 7.1: Improved stability for children and young people in Child Protection and out-of-home care

Stability means stable education and networks, as well as home life. Every time a young person has to move everything changes. *Young person speaking at the inaugural Youth Summit, October 2003, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Inc.*

New scientific knowledge and research into child development gives renewed importance to the need of children and young people for stable care and stable relationships.

Evidence about the brain development of children emphasises the importance of stability, especially in the early years of childhood. Positive, ongoing, caring relationships are the most important factor in supporting a child's development. All children need people, or at least one person, who believe in them, care for them, and want to support them as learners. Children do some of their most powerful learning from modelling what people around them do. It is important that they are with adults who encourage them. Research has linked interrupted relationships with developmental problems, including poor impulse control, low self-esteem, poor relationships with peers, and learning difficulties.

The first stage of the current review of the policy and legislative framework for child, youth and family services in Victoria - the Protecting Children Outcomes Project - reviewed major reforms in Child Protection across Australia and overseas. Conducted by an independent consultant in 2003, this review found:

An important recent development in many child protection systems has been a greater focus on permanency for children in out-of-home care. The aim is to decrease the negative impact of lengthy periods in care, particularly for children with multiple placements who cannot return to their families, by looking sooner at the possibilities of more stable care arrangements, including long-term foster care and permanence within the extended family. (The Allen Consulting Group, 2003)

In Victoria, the number of children and young people in out-of-home care or in temporary custody grew by 27 per cent between 1996 and 2004 (AIHW, 2004).

The Department of Human Services undertook a detailed analysis of the care experiences of the 1,800 children and young people who were placed in care for the first time in 1997-98. The analysis showed that 75 per cent had more than one placement and a third had more than four placements (Department of Human Services, 2003).

Research from Australia and the United Kingdom has further shown that:

- more children are experiencing longer periods in out-of-home care. As at 30 June 2003, 46 per cent of children had been in continuous placement for one to five years
- more children are experiencing multiple placements. A 2003 study of 1,800 children and young people placed in care for the first time in 1997-98 showed that 75 per cent experienced more than one placement and a third had more than four placements

Action 7.1

Where a child or young person is removed from home, Child Protection and health and community services will work intensively with parents to access services and supports to maximise the opportunities for children and young to return home quickly and safely.

- children going into out-of-home care for the first time when they are one or two years old are often not placed into a stable placement until they are nearly eight years old
- the older that a child or young person is when placed in an out-of-home care placement, following repeated unsuccessful attempts at reunification, the more likely it is that the placement will break down.

In most cases, it is in a child or young person's best interests to be raised by their parents. Earlier intervention and intensive work with families is important to maximise the safety, stability and well-being of a child or young person in their own home.

Case planning with a child or young person commences when Child Protection becomes involved with a child and family. From the outset, planning will address the placement of the child or young person.

Practice guidelines will continue to emphasise that alternative forms of support and intervention need to be considered prior to the removal of a child or young person.

Action 7.2

The *Children's Bill* will require Child Protection to make stability case plans within mandated timeframes according to a child or young person's age.

Where a child or young person has been removed from home, the goal will continue to be that the child or young person can safely return home as quickly as possible, to maintain continuity and stability in their care. Stability teams will work closely with secondary child, youth and family services and adult services, such as drug and alcohol, mental health, housing and disability services, to help families address problems and maximise the opportunities for reunification. Parents will be supported to access necessary services through intensive case management and further examination of potential funding models.

While work may continue on reunification, where the likelihood of successful reunification is diminishing, an important reform will be to establish a much stronger expectation on Child Protection to develop a component of the case plan (a stability plan) which focuses on ensuring a stable placement away from home.

The *Children's Bill* establishes maximum timeframes at which point Child Protection must have assessed parental capacity and the likelihood of reunification and prepared this stability plan (unless this is not in the best interests of the child or young person). Timeframes will differ according to the age of the child or young person.

If it is not in the best interests of the child or young person to seek a longer-term stable placement away from home at this point, Child Protection will continue to plan for reunification. Child Protection will be accountable to the Children's Court to explain why it is not in the best interests of the child or young person to work towards a stable, longer-term placement even though they have been in out-of-home care for a significant period of time relative to their age.

Timeframes for stability planning set out in the *Children's Bill* are as follows:

- children under 2 years: 12 cumulative months in alternative care, of which at least 6 months are current and consecutive
- children aged 2 to 6 years: 18 cumulative months in alternative care, of which at least 12 months are current and consecutive
- children aged 7 years and older: 2 years, or 2 cumulative years out of the last 3 years.

A stable placement may be supported by a custody or guardianship order. Where a young person (12 years or older) consents, and there is a person available with whom the young person will continue to live for the duration of the order, the *Children's Bill* provides greater flexibility for the Children's Court to make longer-term 'guardianship to Secretary' orders. This order would apply until the young person turned 18 (but could be revoked at any time).

Children in care will benefit from this approach because having to return to the Children's Court every two years is very unsettling and reminds them of their stigmatised status. Long-term guardianships will enable them to live a more normal life.

As is the case now, where a child or young person is in a stable out-of-home placement and Child Protection assesses that the birth parents are unlikely to make sustainable changes to provide a safe home for their child or young person, a permanent care order may be sought from the Children's Court. This would mean that the alternate carer (who may be an extended family member) would assume full legal responsibility for the child until they turned 18.

The Children's Court will continue to provide significant accountability for decisions about vulnerable children and vulnerable young people. For example, the Court will retain its current role in deciding whether a child should be removed from home and the need for longer-term care arrangements if reunification is not in the best interests of the child. Court orders will only be made where they are in the best interests of the child or young person.

Action 7.3

The Department of Human Services will establish stability planning frameworks to support informed and structured decision-making about long term care arrangements for children and young people.

Stability-planning framework

In addition to new legislative measures to promote children's stability, a stability-planning framework will be developed to guide the development of stability plans. This framework will support informed and structured decision-making about longer-term care arrangements for children and young people.

The framework will emphasise the need to closely assess:

- the birth family's capacity to care for the child and adequately meet his or her needs
- the impact of multiple reunification attempts and whether continued attempts at reunification are in the best interests of a child or young person
- the risk of ongoing abuse.

The stability-planning framework will continue to uphold the principle that the degree of intrusion into people's lives needs to be commensurate with – and justified by – the degree of risk to the child in each case. At the same time, it will challenge the view that reunification is something that can and should be actively pursued in an ongoing way without regard to the potential risk to the child's safety, health, learning, well-being and development.

The defining characteristic for children who should be provided with a stability plan is that their parents lack the capacity to protect them and ensure their well-being, even with the provision of intensive services and support. For these children, the stability-planning framework will emphasise that more should be done earlier to provide them with the opportunity to live in and be part of a family.

The stability-planning framework will integrate stability-planning processes with the *Looking After Children toolkit*. Looking After Children is a shared good practice tool that is critical in identifying the needs of children in out-of-home care across a number of key life-domains. It has been implemented across the State with Child Protection and out-of-home care service providers. It focuses on all those who have a share in the parenting responsibility of children, including the family of origin, the Child Protection worker and the care giver, all working together around the interests of the child, promoting stability and family connectedness.

Additional reforms to strengthen out-of-home care placements are discussed in Strategy 7.5.

Proposed creation of multidisciplinary teams and regional stability panels

Further consideration is required on how best to implement more rigorous stability planning. For example, stability-planning could be undertaken by multidisciplinary teams, involving Child Protection workers and health and community service professionals. Whether stability-planning occurs through Child Protection teams or new multidisciplinary teams, core responsibilities will include:

- working intensively with children and families to maximise the opportunities for family reunification
- assessing parental capacity and a child or young person's best interests
- preparing stability case-plans in a timely way
- ensuring that stability plans are transparent to parents and carers.

New quality assurance processes will be established to monitor the consistency and quality of stability planning and the effectiveness of strategies to assist families to access appropriate services and supports. One option under consideration is to establish regional stability panels to undertake this quality assurance. These panels will involve departmental staff as well as independent experts and will meet on a Statewide basis to share learnings and to promote continuous quality improvement.

Action 7.4

The Department of Human Services will establish quality assurance processes for stability planning.

All 74 White Paper Actions are tabulated in Appendix 4.

The Victorian Government is committed to working with Aboriginal communities to:

- **strengthen families and communities**
- **prevent so many Aboriginal children and young people entering out-of-home care**
- **where children cannot remain safely at home, maintain strong links to their culture and community.**

Strategy 7.2: Aboriginal children, young people and families

The number of Aboriginal children involved with Child Protection and Youth Justice is a very serious problem. Recent data show that:

- as at 30 June 2004, the rate of Victorian Aboriginal children on protection orders was 11 times higher than for non-Aboriginal children
- Aboriginal children in Victoria are almost 13 times more likely to be in care than non-Aboriginal children
- Aboriginal young people are 16 times more likely to be in youth detention than non-Aboriginal young people.

Addressing these high levels of over-representation is especially important, given that 57 per cent of the Aboriginal population is under 25 years old.

Also, Aboriginal children and Aboriginal young people and their families are under-represented in the use of universal, primary and more specialist community-based services.

The *Aboriginal Services Plan key indicators report* (Department of Human Services, 2004b), shows that:

- Aboriginal babies are more likely to die during pregnancy, to be stillborn, and to die in the first 28 days of life than non-Aboriginal babies
- Aboriginal children are more likely to suffer from a range of vaccine-preventable infections, and also other infections, such as ear and respiratory infections
- Aboriginal children and young people are less likely to achieve relevant literacy and numeracy standards than non-Aboriginal children and young people
- Aboriginal children and young people are more likely to experience poverty during their life.

In consulting on potential system and legislative reforms to child, youth and family services, an independent panel chaired by Peter Kirby emphasised that:

A key to the successful reform of children's and family services for Aboriginal communities will be ensuring they are developed in an holistic manner. It will not be sufficient to add an Indigenous element to, for example, the assessment and investigation procedure or to make modifications to the out-of-home care processes for Aboriginal children without considering whether the system as a whole is inclusive of Indigenous cultures and values. This will necessitate a greater recognition than is currently the case that the Indigenous communities should be able to exercise a significant measure of control over the provision of services delivered to their communities. (Freiberg, Kirby & Ward, 2004)

The chronology of Aboriginal children's welfare and protection in Victoria reveals an historic lack of culturally sensitive responses to the needs of Aboriginal children and their communities (Table 2).

*Table 2
Chronology of services for and protection of Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria*

- 1840s: segregation – missions established
- 1860s: Board for the Protection of Aborigines
- 1886: Aborigines Protection Board treats children of mixed descent differently from other Aboriginal children. Beginning of removalist policies on the basis of skin colour
- 1937: Assimilation Policy endorsed at the first Commonwealth State Conference on Native Welfare
- 1957: Aborigines Protection Board changed to Aborigines Welfare Board to assist assimilation policy
- 1967: Referendum gave Aboriginal people the vote and made them citizens and subsequently Aboriginal children came under the same legislation as other children. Policy of integration was endorsed nationally.
- 1972: Policy of Self-Determination
- 1975: Policy of Self-Management
- Changes in the understanding of the importance of Aboriginal children remaining with their families occurred between 1967 and 1968; however, government reports indicate that the number of Aboriginal children forcibly removed continued to increase.
- In 1973, 220 Aboriginal children were removed, and, in 1976, 350 were removed.
- In 1976 the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency was established, resulting in a 40 per cent reduction in the number of Aboriginal children in children's homes
- 1989: *Children and Young Persons Act*, incorporating Aboriginal Child Placement Principle case-planning principles
- 1992: Development of protocol between the Department of Human Services and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
- 2002: Development of the Department of Human Services and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Protocol, supported by increased funding

The Victorian Government has taken significant steps to improve service provision for Aboriginal children, young people and families, including through the introduction of a protocol between the Department of Human Services and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency in 2002. New initiatives to strengthen supports to Aboriginal children and families include:

- in-home support for Aboriginal mothers to provide continuity of care following on from the Koori Maternity Service. This initiative will also educate Aboriginal families about the importance of the early years universal services and assist them to make links to other community-based supports
- expanding Aboriginal Best Start projects to trial new ways for communities, parents, families, elders and service providers to make the early years services more responsive to local needs. These will build on two existing Aboriginal Best Start projects in Morwell/Baw Baw and Horsham
- an Aboriginal family restoration program to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care. The program will provide an intensive and holistic approach to preventing Aboriginal family breakdown and ensuring the safety of Aboriginal children and young people within their homes. Innovative approaches will be trialled. These may include 24-hour, seven-day-a-week in-home support to entire families where there is a risk of a child or young person being placed in out-of-home care, and rapid support services to maximise the likelihood of reunification if a child or young person has been removed.

Action 7.5

The Department of Human Services will better support Aboriginal families through in-home support for new mothers, four new Aboriginal Best Start projects, and an Aboriginal family restoration program.

Strengthening the capacity of Aboriginal services

The Government is committed to strengthening Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to enable a broader range of child, youth and family services to be delivered to Aboriginal people by Aboriginal people.

Strengthening those community-controlled services that are targeted at children, young people and families will involve a range of actions, which include:

- recruiting more Aboriginal people into Aboriginal-controlled organisations that deliver services to children, young people and families
- improving training opportunities for Aboriginal people in these organisations so that there are more Aboriginal people with skills in child development
- supporting these organisations to roll out new programs while ensuring the quality of existing services
- working with these organisations to ensure that their management structures appropriately reflect their functions and needs.

The Department of Human Services is working closely with Aboriginal communities and community-controlled organisations to develop planned approaches to each of these actions.

Actions under this White Paper will be coordinated with broader whole-of-government strategies (described in *A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage*) aimed at building skills and capacity and improving access to services within Aboriginal communities.

Improving the responsiveness of mainstream services

In parallel, there is a need to improve the cultural responsiveness of mainstream services to strengthen inclusion of Aboriginal children, young people and families in earlier intervention and prevention services.

Changes in organisational culture and practice will be driven by the new quality assurance and performance arrangements. Improvements in the cultural appropriateness of service responses will also be promoted through:

- the development of practice guidelines, developed in consultation with Aboriginal communities
- improved training in cultural issues for professionals who work with Aboriginal children and Aboriginal young people and their families.

Action 7.6

The *Children's Bill* will require Child Protection and community services to comply with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. The *Children's Bill* will also require Child Protection to demonstrate compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle before the Children's Court can make a permanent care order.

Maintaining cultural links for Aboriginal children who cannot live safely at home

Consultations with Aboriginal communities highlighted concerns about the separation of Aboriginal children and young people from their communities and culture, especially given that more than 50 per cent of Aboriginal children and young people are placed in mainstream out-of-home care services. Currently, only 62 per cent of Victorian Aboriginal children and young people in care are placed with Aboriginal families, with many children and young people becoming separated from their culture.

The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle is a nationally agreed standard in determining the placement of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. The principle aims to enhance and preserve Aboriginal children's cultural identity by ensuring that they maintain strong connections with their family, community and culture. The principle governs the work practice of Child Protection practitioners when placing Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care.

Enshrining the placement principle in legislation will help to strengthen compliance and bring Victoria in line with other States.

The form of the principle for inclusion in the *Children's Bill* has been discussed with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care and is set out at Figure 8.

Implementation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle will be supported by continued strengthening of the Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Services (ACSASS), which involves an Aboriginal agency in investigations and case planning whenever Child Protection receives a notification about an Aboriginal child or young person.

Figure 8 The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle

It is proposed that the principle be included in legislation as follows:

1. Removal of any Aboriginal child from their community and family environment by any welfare or government authority or other persons must be a last resort.
2. In the event, after consultation with an approved Aboriginal community child, youth and family welfare organisation, of separation or removal of a child from its family being unavoidable, then the courts or authorities will have regard to that advice and the following criteria:
 - (i) As a priority, wherever possible, the child must be placed within the Aboriginal extended family or relatives and where this is not possible other extended family and relatives
 - (ii) If the above is not feasible or possible after consultation with an approved Aboriginal community child, youth and family welfare organisation the child may be placed with:
 - (a) An Aboriginal family from the local community and within close geographical proximity to the child's natural family
 - (b) An Aboriginal family from another Aboriginal community
 - (c) As a last resort the child may be placed, after consultation with an approved Aboriginal community child, youth and family welfare organisation with a non-Aboriginal family living in close proximity to the child's natural family
 - (d) Any non-Aboriginal placement must ensure the maintenance of the child's culture and identity through contact with the child's community.

Action 7.7

The Department of Human Services will implement the new Connecting to Care Program, which will involve working with Aboriginal communities and mainstream out-of-home care services to transfer the management of Aboriginal children and young in out-of-home care placements to community-controlled organisations.

Action 7.8

Recruitment of Aboriginal carers, particularly kinship carers, will be aided by the Department of Human Services taking action to improve training and support to Aboriginal carers.

Action 7.9

The Department of Human Services will work with Aboriginal communities to develop culturally appropriate models for stability planning and out-of-home care.

Action 7.10

The *Children's Bill* enables the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to authorise heads of approved Aboriginal organisations to assume responsibility for managing Children's Court protection orders relating to an Aboriginal child or young person. Approval would be granted on a case-by-case basis.

Out-of-home care for Aboriginal children and young people

Where it is not safe for an Aboriginal child or young person to be with their birth parents, kinship care will be the preferred model of out-of-home care. Reforms are focused on ensuring that all attempts are made to place the child or young person within their extended family and community, and to maintain the child or young person's connection to their community and culture. It is proposed that compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle will be required before a permanent care order can be made.

The Office for Children will also work with Aboriginal organisations on the recruitment of Aboriginal carers. Training and supports will help to increase the pool of Aboriginal carers.

Recruitment of carers will also be assisted by new approaches to stability-planning and models of out-of-home care. New approaches will be developed collaboratively with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care and with Aboriginal communities. Models will be culturally appropriate and reflect Aboriginal models of family and community. Kinship care will be the central focus of new approaches. Consideration will be given to how accountability for the care of a child or young person could be more formally shared between carers.

The Office for Children is working with Aboriginal organisations on a new Connecting to Care Program, which will involve transferring the management of Aboriginal children and young people's placements in out-of-home care, away from mainstream organisations and to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

A major priority in the longer term is working with Aboriginal communities to increase the participation of Aboriginal families and communities in the design of service responses and decision-making about Aboriginal children and young people. Over time, the aim is to enable community-controlled organisations to take greater responsibility for the care and protection of children and young people. With capacity building and support, the goal is ultimately for the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to delegate the management of Children's Court orders to the heads of an approved Aboriginal agency.

Action 7.11

The Department of Human Services will work with community-controlled organisations to build skills and capacity, so that responsibility for case management and case planning can be transferred from the Secretary to the heads of approved Aboriginal organisations.

Action 7.12

The recently established Protecting Children Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Working Group will provide a stronger focus on cultural diversity in policies and services for children, young people and families within the Department of Human Services' Office for Children.

Strategy 7.3: Children, young people and families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities

Under current legislation, Child Protection is required to consider a child or young person's cultural identity and ensure that a representative of their cultural community is invited to decision-making meetings, if that is the wish of the child, young person, or their parents. Interpreters must also be provided at decision-making meetings when they are needed. However, this has been done on a case-by-case basis, and the urgency of some decision-making and the diversity of culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Victoria has restricted opportunities for community involvement. There have been no specific requirements placed on services provided to families in the community.

In future, these issues will be addressed at a systemic level, with services being required to make themselves accessible and sensitive to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Cultural training, service agreements, and new registration requirements proposed under the *Children's Bill* will be used to promote cultural service standards for child, youth and family services.

The Office for Children has established the Protecting Children Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Working Group, with representation from a wide range of culturally and linguistically diverse peak bodies. This group will advise the Office for Children about the implementation of new arrangements to ensure that culturally and linguistically diverse organisations are involved at a Statewide and regional level in planning and service development. New processes will be considered to ensure that these organisations are consulted when appropriate with regard to decision-making on individual cases.

Particular attention will be paid to more recent culturally and linguistically diverse communities, especially those who have arrived as refugees, since these tend to have the highest needs, while also being the least visible to child, youth and family services that may be able to assist.

Strategy 7.4: Young people involved in the youth justice system

Youth Justice aims to divert vulnerable young people away from the criminal justice system, to rehabilitate young people involved with Youth Justice by providing youth-focused, gender- and culture-specific case management services, and to provide transition and post-release support to successfully integrate young offenders into the community. Youth Justice has initiated a range of reforms that support these aims. Key initiatives include:

Age change for youth justice

The *Children and Young Persons Act* was amended to increase the age limit of the Children's Court from 17 to 18 years. This will ensure that young people are not caught up in the adult criminal justice system. More young people will benefit from diversionary, rehabilitation and support services.

Restorative Justice Mentoring Program

The Restorative Justice Mentoring Program will provide volunteer mentors to support young people in youth justice centres or on youth attendance orders in the southern and eastern regions of Melbourne, and link them to education, training and employment opportunities. The aim of the program is to increase the likelihood of a successful transition from custody to the community, and to strengthen the factors associated with reducing offending behaviours.

Volunteer mentors will constructively support young people (either through individual or group mentoring) in a social sense, and assist them to reduce offending behaviours and to develop other goals and responsibilities, with a focus on education, training and employment.

Koori Children's Court

The Department of Human Services is working in partnership with the Department of Justice in implementing a Children's Koori Court to be run as a pilot. The Koori Children's Court will be applied to sentencing young people within a culturally appropriate framework.

The Koori Children's Court aims to reduce the over-representation of Koori young people within the juvenile justice system.

Victorian Youth Justice Rehabilitation Review

Youth Justice will continue to develop and implement practice and program initiatives to reduce offending and to increase young people's reintegration into social and economic life in the community. The University of South Australia and the Australian Institute of Criminology were commissioned to identify 'what works' in effective offender rehabilitation, including conducting research on effective programs, documenting current case practice and programs against the 'what works' literature, and analysing recidivism risk and needs tools.

A best-practice model for rehabilitation within the youth justice system has been identified, and its implementation will occur over the next three to four years. A risk- and needs-assessment tool, called the Victorian Offending Needs Indicator for Youth, has been developed, and a centralised database is being set up that will allow for comprehensive profiling of clients and more precise targeting of resources.

As part of the best-practice model, an intervention framework is being developed to match case-practice and program initiatives to the identified needs of young people involved in the youth justice system. The monitoring and evaluation of this process will inform the ongoing development of the Victorian youth justice system.

Action 7.13

The Government will continue to develop better ways of providing culturally appropriate youth justice services for Aboriginal young people.

Action 7.14

The Department of Human Services will work with out-of-home care services, to:

- strengthen the service model for kinship care
- develop therapeutic services and models of care to support young people with complex needs.

Strategy 7.5: Young people in out-of-home care

Part I discussed the importance of delivering high-quality, stable care to children and young people who cannot live at home.

No single model of care or service can ever meet the needs of all children and young people. Victoria, historically, has had a strong platform of foster and residential-based care. Recruiting longer-term foster carers is always a challenge, especially for older children. Recent State budgets have provided greater supports to carers to assist them in supporting children who have complex needs.

In recent years, there has been a growing use of kinship care placements when children and young people are unable to safely live at home, and this trend is expected to continue. Options to better integrate kinship care within the broader continuum of home-based care services managed by the community sector are being examined with placement services. Service models for kinship care will be developed to best meet the needs of children, young people, their carers, and families.

The Victorian community has a strong interest in reducing risk-taking behaviours by young people. Young people in care, many of whom have experienced significant abuse and neglect, are at high risk.

New models of care that have a therapeutic component are being developed to meet the complex needs of some clients. Consultations have commenced on a professional or therapeutic model of foster care. More intensive and therapeutic models of residential care are also being examined, building on the innovative Take Two service. For example, this may include step-down services for young people on leaving secure welfare facilities.

Leaving care initiatives

In Victoria, every year around 450 young people leave out-of-home care to live independently. All young people experience challenges in making the transition to adulthood and independent living. For young people leaving care, the lack of access to informal supports often makes this transition even more difficult. A recent study commissioned by the Centre for Excellence (Centre for Excellence, 2005) found that young people leaving care are more likely than the general population to:

- become involved in tertiary services, such as homeless services, mental health, or drug and alcohol services
- become involved in adult corrections
- place their own children at risk of harm, resulting in ongoing Child Protection involvement in their lives.

A study by MacKillop Family Services found that young people feel they have very little input to the decision about when they were to leave care, and so felt 'dumped' and 'chucked out' (London, 2004).

The past two Victorian State budgets have provided funding for mentoring programs for young people aged 16 to 18 years as they prepare to leave care. Mentoring services aim to provide young people with opportunities to interact with adults in community settings, to promote a sense of community linkage, and to prepare the young person to successfully transition from care to independence.

As part of the Office of Housing's *Youth Homeless Action Plan: First Stage report*, funding has also been directed to extend the Leaving Care Housing and Support Initiative (initially piloted in 2002-03) to all regions. One of these projects will be specifically for Aboriginal young people leaving care.

Action 7.15

The *Children's Bill* places a responsibility on the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to assist young people up to the age of 21 to make the transition from out-of-home care to independent living.

Action 7.16

In order to assist young people leaving care to make the transition to independent living, Child Protection will be responsible for developing case plans to prepare young people for leaving care.

Most States in Australia also place an obligation on the guardian of children in out-of-home care to help them to make the transition to independent living.

The *Children's Bill* brings Victoria into line with other jurisdictions by giving greater emphasis to the Secretary's responsibilities 'as a good parent' for children and young people leaving care.

The legislated responsibility will be to assist young people until they reach the age of 21. For most young people, it is expected that the greatest need for support will be in the initial years after leaving care. Some young people will require longer-term support. There will be flexibility, on a case-by-case basis, to provide assistance to young people beyond the age of 21.

In order to assist young people leaving care to make the transition to independent living:

- carers will be encouraged to teach young people skills such as hygiene, cooking, shopping, washing and budgeting
- Child Protection will be responsible for developing case plans to prepare young people for leaving care
- it is proposed to establish a leaving care program.

Action 7.17

Government will further consider the potential elements of a leaving care program.

The Government will consider the elements and options for delivering a leaving care program. Further consultations will occur on which amongst Child Protection, out-of-home care, or secondary child, youth and family services are best placed to work with young people who have left care. A leaving care program could involve:

- providing case management and mentoring to young people
- assisting young people to access appropriate services and supports (for example, through linking young people into training, mental health, and drug and alcohol and housing services).

All 74 White Paper Actions are tabulated in Appendix 4.

Action 7.18

The Department of Human Services will work with early childhood intervention services to implement the 2004–05 budget initiatives to better support children with a disability or developmental delay.

Strategy 7.6: Children with a disability

The Government's policy statement, *Putting children first ... the next steps* emphasised that:

As a community which values children, our priority is to ensure that development and learning are optimised for all children wherever they live, play and are cared for:

With the *Putting children first ... the next steps* policy as the starting point, an approach to promote integrated services for children and families has been developed. This means building linkages and partnerships between services, such as maternal and child health, kindergarten, child care, and family support, so that services work together, and it is easier for families to have access to the full range of supports they need.

With this in mind, the Government has injected significant funding into early childhood intervention services. The new funding will help to ensure that early childhood intervention services:

- form part of a comprehensive and integrated continuum of child and family services to support all children and families
- are linked to the development of collaborative relationships with universal services to build community capacity, to foster participation of all children and families in local community life, and to enable the early identification of children and families in need of specialised support
- support families to care for children with a disability or developmental delay
- promote the delivery of high-quality, responsive services to children and their families, recognising the need to develop a highly skilled workforce and sustainable service providers.



All services have a responsibility to establish positive relationships and environments in delivering services to vulnerable children, and vulnerable young people and their families.

Strategy 8: Appropriate dispute resolution: involving children, young people, families and communities in decision-making

Creating positive environments for children and young people is a shared responsibility of families, communities and government, and child, youth and family services.

Direct relationships with service providers have an effect not only on the delivery of the service, but also on the broader well-being of children, young people and families. The importance of positive relationships and service settings is important in all service delivery, from universal services through to the out-of-home care setting. It is particularly significant for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families, who can be disconnected from other informal networks and supports.

One of the most powerful ways to provide a positive and engaging environment for children, young people and their families is to support their participation in decision-making about their lives. An important principle of the Government's policy framework is to promote a solution focus in decision-making about vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families.

Appropriate decision-making models will be encouraged, from earlier intervention through to the Children's Court, which encourage family participation and embed a solution focus in decision-making processes.

Family group conferencing

Prior to court proceedings, family group conferencing is currently used by Child Protection to empower families to make decisions about their children and to maximise their participation in the process. Where appropriate, carers and other community members are also encouraged to participate in family group conferences. The conferences can result in an agreed plan to address risks and problems and better promote children and young people's well-being and development.

As noted in Part 2, the Government is researching the potential benefits of using family group conferencing earlier, and in broader community settings, as part of the spectrum of appropriate dispute resolution methods.

Aboriginal family decision-making

Aboriginal family decision-making aims to ensure Aboriginal families are given the opportunity to participate in decision-making meetings in relation to their children and young people, and ensure that these meetings are sensitive and respectful to Aboriginal culture and family values. Aboriginal family decision-making is to be made available at the earliest possible time following a notification to Child Protection, and also throughout Child Protection's involvement.

Since November 2002, the Shepparton (Hume Region) Child Protection program, in partnership with Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative, has operated a successful Aboriginal family decision-making program. An evaluation of the program in 2003 found very positive outcomes in relation to keeping children and young people within their family, as well as ensuring many families did not progress through the Child Protection system. The program has achieved a high level of engagement and acceptance among respected members of Aboriginal communities and family members.

Aboriginal family decision-making will continue to be strengthened and rolled out across Victoria.

Action 8.1

The Department of Human Services will work with community-controlled organisations to roll out Aboriginal family decision-making programs across Victoria.

Action 8.2

The *Children's Bill* enables the use of group conferencing at the pre-sentence stage of Criminal Division proceedings within the Children's Court.

Youth Justice group conferencing

The Youth Justice Group Conferencing Program is a community rehabilitation intervention based on restorative justice principles which is available to the Children's Court at the pre-sentence stage. The group conferencing program aims to divert young offenders aged 10 to 17 years who would otherwise be placed on Youth Justice supervised orders such as probation.

Group conferencing convenors bring together the young offender, family, police, legal representatives, community members, and the victim or victim representative, in order to assist the offender to acknowledge responsibility for their behaviour and its impact on others, and to develop a plan to assist the young person and to prevent further offending. The program emphasises the importance of the relationships within and between these groups for strengthening the young person's supports, and identifies ways of repairing the harm associated with the young person's offending.

Group conferencing in Victoria currently operates in the metropolitan regions and two rural areas: Hume and Gippsland. It is proposed to include group conferencing in legislation and to extend the program across Victoria from July 2006.

Other opportunities to strengthen the involvement of Aboriginal communities in decision-making are also being explored. For example, an option canvassed in consultations with Aboriginal communities was the establishment of local panels of elders. These panels could have a role in advising the Government on the effectiveness of policies and services in strengthening families and addressing service gaps. They could also participate in family decision-making processes, having input to case planning and decision-making about the safety and well-being of children and young people.

Work will continue with Aboriginal Affairs Victoria and Aboriginal communities to develop effective ways of working with Aboriginal communities to improve the outcomes for Aboriginal children, Aboriginal young people and their families.

Action 8.3

The Department of Human Services will work with the Children's Court, the Department of Justice and other key experts to develop new models of appropriate dispute resolution to apply once an application has been made to the Family Division of the Children's Court.

Appropriate dispute resolution in court settings

In his 2004 Justice Statement, the Victorian Attorney-General emphasised the potential benefits of flexible approaches to working through problems and developing plans to resolve them, especially for disadvantaged groups and communities.

Appropriate dispute resolution techniques within court settings provide opportunities to minimise the costs of disputing, to provide faster dispute resolution, and to provide non-adversarial processes and remedies that are adaptable to the needs of those involved. Appropriate dispute resolution can include mediation, arbitration, conciliation, preliminary evaluation by a third party, and a range of other approaches.

Another crucial benefit of appropriate dispute resolution models is that, unlike adversarial approaches, they treat the relationship between the disputing parties as important and seek to protect and enhance the relationship. Since partnership approaches are strongly advocated in Child Protection, this is of particular value.

More formal court hearings, which are adversarial and designed around legal representation, will always be an essential mechanism to resolve disputes and protect rights, where a child or young person is assessed as being at significant risk of harm.

The next step in strengthening a solution focus and engaging families in decision-making is to develop new models of appropriate dispute resolution within the Children's Court. Currently, pre-hearing conferences provide the only format for appropriate dispute resolution for Child Protection matters

within the Children's Court. Pre-hearing conferences are facilitative, meaning that a third party provides assistance in managing the process of dispute resolution, but will not provide advice (to the parties or the Children's Court) on the facts and possible outcomes. Pre-hearing conferences are only available for some matters before the Court. The Children's Court is currently reviewing pre-hearing conferences.

Other models for appropriate dispute resolution are also starting to be considered. Consistent with the Attorney-General's Justice Statement, the aim is to provide a flexible range of legal responses to children and families. All of these responses are inclusive, solution-focused, and less adversarial.

Changes to the legislation are proposed, to encourage the broader use of appropriate dispute resolution at an earlier stage. In particular, changes will:

- clarify that both facilitative and advisory models of appropriate dispute resolution may be used in the Family Division
- enable the Court to refer the full range of applications that are before it to appropriate dispute resolution
- provide greater quality assurance in relation to appropriate dispute resolution convenors
- clarify issues of legal representation
- clarify how information from appropriate dispute resolution can be used in future court proceedings.

The Department of Human Services will work with the Children's Court, the Department of Justice, and other key experts, to further develop appropriate dispute resolution models to apply once an application has been made to the Family Division of the Children's Court. In particular, consideration will need to be given to:

- how best to support the participation of children, young people, families and carers in the proceeding
- an appropriate role for lawyers which enables the provision of legal support, but does not rely on lawyers (rather than the participants) 'representing' the views of children, young people, families, carers, and Child Protection practitioners.

Strategy 9: Making it easier to work with government

Changing the way the Government works with communities and community organisations was one of the strategies of *A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage*. The Government is committed to streamlining practices and processes across government, to reduce the administrative burden on non-government services. Two significant initiatives will reduce administrative processes and assist child, youth and family services to focus on delivering effective services:

Action 9.1

In order to streamline administrative requirements for non-government services, the Department of Human Services will:

- streamline care giver payments
- and
- roll out a new Client Relationship Information System for Service Providers.

Centralising caregiver payments

After consultation with Foster Carers Association of Victoria and other stakeholders, the Department of Human Services intends to relieve community services delivering out-of-home care services of the requirement to manage the funds provided in trust for care-giver reimbursements. This will relieve community services of the requirement to hold the care-giver funds in trust, to pay and to acquit these funds, significantly reducing the administrative work for out-of-home care services.

Client Relationship Information System for Service Providers

The Department of Human Services is developing and rolling out a new, modern and flexible client information and case management system, which will be available for use by department-funded child, youth and family service providers.

The Client Relationship Information System for Service Providers is a Web-based, secure and flexible client and case management system designed to support and improve service delivery to clients and to enable client consent and privacy to be maintained. It is also designed to streamline reporting, replacing some existing departmental service reporting systems, such as the Funded Agency Client Transaction System (FACTS).

The re-organisation of the Office for Children will also help to streamline administrative arrangements. Child Protection, Placement and Support, Family Services, Parenting Services, Family Violence, Sexual Assault and Victims of Crime services have been brought together into a single branch. This will assist in coordinating planning and strengthening relationships between the continuum of services targeted at vulnerable children and families. In particular, new arrangements bring together the Family Support Innovation Projects and broader policy and program management relating to family support services.

The creation of the Youth Justice and Young People's Services Branch as part of the new Office for Children brings together responsibilities and programs supporting the safety, health, learning, development and well-being of vulnerable young people. The Young People's Services area provides a focal point for the coordination of policy and program development for vulnerable youth services within the department, and a lead role in partnerships with Department of Education and Training, and the Office for Youth. This will be strengthened by efforts to build strong relationships across government, as discussed in Strategy 14.

The Department of Human Services will participate in whole-of-government efforts to standardise and reduce the number of State funding agreements required for community organisations.



part 3

Administering the service system to achieve outcomes

Strong partnerships and collaborative approaches to quality, planning, service and sector development and learning will need to underscore new approaches in service delivery.

Part 3 brings the key elements of systems governance together in a more coordinated way to embed an outcomes focus in how child, youth and family services are administered in Victoria.

Context of Part 3

Effective partnerships between the Government and professionals are critical to ensuring that services and supports continue to meet the needs of vulnerable children, vulnerable young people and their families, and carers and communities.

A collaborative, coordinated approach to administering the service system should not undermine the operational responsibilities of individual regions and agencies. One of Victoria's major characteristics is the diversity and creativity of its child, youth and family services.

Part 3 of this White Paper examines ways in which the Victorian Government, local government, and child, youth and family services can work together more effectively. The focus is on strategic activities that are relevant to the delivery of secondary and tertiary child, youth and family services across Victoria. It explores opportunities for stronger partnerships throughout the cycle of building knowledge, meeting community expectations of high quality and integrated services, measuring performance, and evaluating success, sharing learnings and planning to meet future demand and need.

Key strategies contained in Part 3 are summarised in Figure 9.

Figure 9
Administering the service system to achieve outcomes, strategies 10 to 14



Within these strategies, **Strategy 11** contains two sub-strategies:

11.1 Accountability.

11.2 Quality assurance.

Strategy 12 contains four sub-strategies:

12.1 Improving access to and use of data.

12.2 Performance measures and evaluation.

12.3 Research.

12.4 Sharing learning.

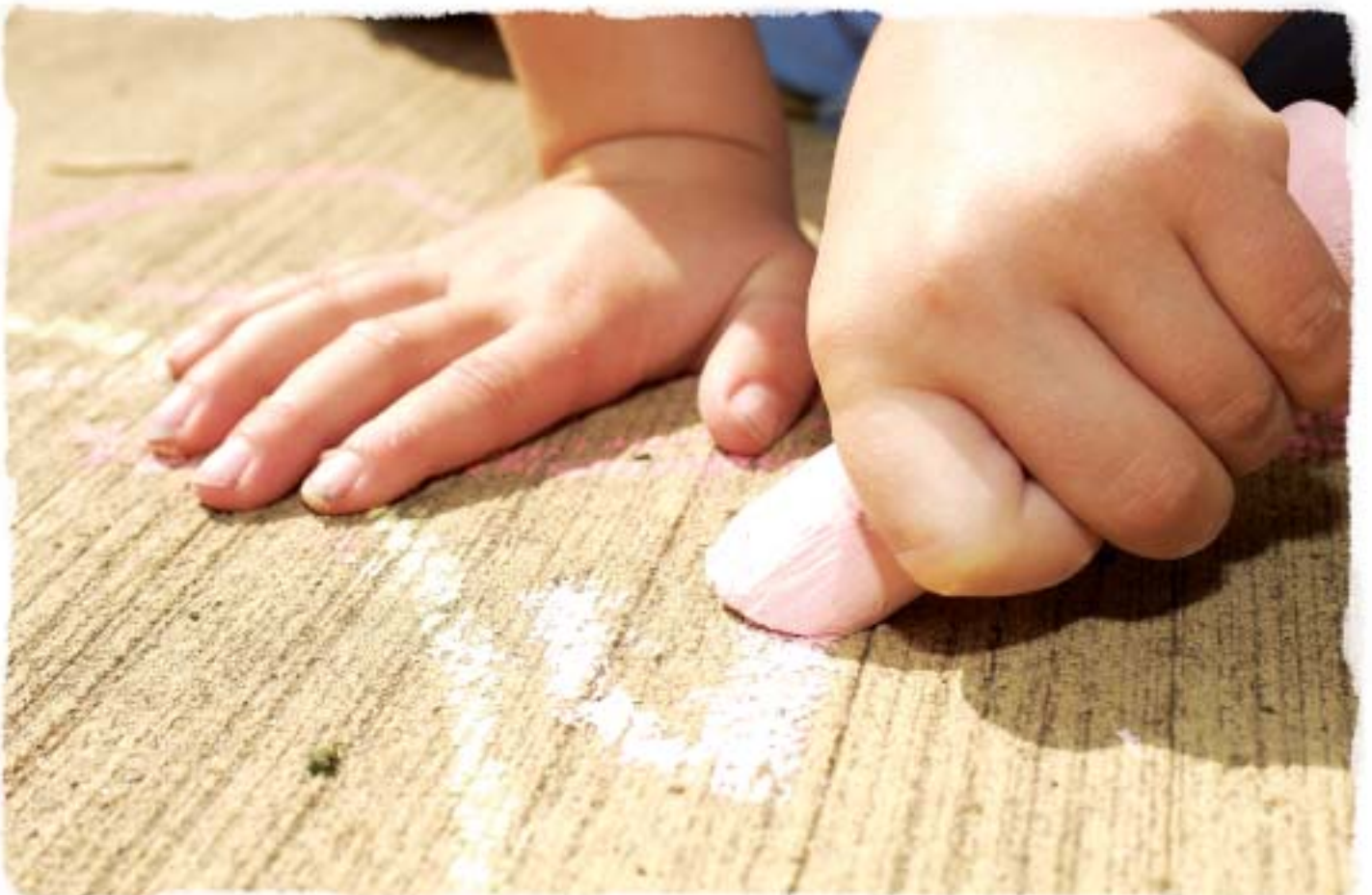
Strategy 13 contains one sub-strategy:

13.1 Workforce development.

Strategy 14 contains two sub-strategies:

14.1 Working better with government.

14.2 More effective sharing of information.



All actions and decisions made under new legislation will be subject to a best interests test, which focuses on the need to protect children from harm, to protect their rights and to promote their development.

Action 10.1

The *Children's Bill* requires Child Protection, community services and the Children's Court to apply the best interests principle as the paramount consideration in all decision-making and service delivery.

Strategy 10: Building shared objectives in order to place children and young people's best interests at the heart of decision-making and service delivery

In *A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage*, the Government committed to placing the best interests of children and young people at the heart of decision-making about protecting children and young people, and promoting their development and well-being.

Under the current system, the Children's Court's decisions are guided by s. 87 of the *Children and Young Persons Act*, Child Protection decision-making is governed by s. 119 of the *Children and Young Persons Act*, and non-government child, youth and family services have no legislated decision-making framework.

The Bill defines the need to protect children and young people from harm, to protect their rights, and to promote their development. These factors will be paramount considerations in all decision-making and service delivery, from earlier intervention through to the Children's Court.¹

Additional guidance is provided for professionals who are considering how best to support children's safety, rights and development. An additional list of factors to be taken into account as relevant will include positive relationships with families, the importance of continuity and stability in the child or young person's care, the child or young person's views and wishes, and the child or young person's social and cultural identity. The full text of the 'best interests' principle is provided in the exposure draft of the *Children's Bill* (see 'Internet resources cited in the White Paper' for accessing this draft).

A consistent approach to promoting children and young people's best interests among services working with children, young people and families is aligned with the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory. This will provide support to two of the key aims of the reforms: to make the system more child-focused, and to make the system more integrated.

A key feature of the new principle is requiring a stronger focus on children and young people's development. This is consistent with *Putting children first ... the next steps*, which identified child development as a key basis for the shaping of policy and service responses for children and young people in Victoria.

Development will be defined broadly, to include physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual development. This is consistent with the use of development in a range of legislation, including the existing *Children and Young Persons Act*, the *Intellectual Disability Act 1986*, the *Children's Services Act 1996*, the *Family Law Act 1975*, and other child protection legislation around Australia.

¹ The 'best interests' principle will not apply to the Criminal Division provisions of the Bill. It will not override any other statutory obligations on service providers (for example, obligations of Supported Accommodation Assistance Program providers under the *Housing Act 1983*).

The introduction of the 'best interests' principle will encourage a change in how professionals and practitioners approach the protection of children and young people. Whereas the *Children and Young Persons Act* currently encourages a focus on individual incidents, the 'best interests' principle will guide community service organisations, Child Protection and the Children's Court to focus on the whole context surrounding the child or young person to ensure the best possible decision can be made. In making applications and dispositions to the Children's Court, Child Protection will need to demonstrate how its application fosters the safety, rights and development of the child or young person.

In particular, the principle will shift the focus from the immediate safety of a child or young person to encompassing their longer-term well-being and development. Harm will encompass accumulated harm, as well as crises, or a single serious incident.

The 'best interests' principle will also provide a framework for decision-making about the removal and longer-term care arrangements of a child or young person. Where children or young people are removed, the principle promotes a strong focus on planning for reunification, while also emphasising their need for stability. The principle will guide Child Protection to consider the impact of placements and efforts at reunification on the child or young person.

The principle also emphasises the importance of maintaining relationships with birth families when children and young people cannot live safely at home. For Aboriginal children and young people, the best interests principle will also emphasise the importance of maintaining their connection to their culture and community.



Action 11.1

The Child Well-being and Safety Bill will guide the operation of the Child Safety Commissioner (including the Advocate for Children in Care).

Action 11.2

The Child Safety Commissioner will:

- advise on the safety of vulnerable children and young people in Victoria
- promote child friendly and safe practices in the Victorian community
- monitor and promote high quality out-of-home care services
- undertake inquiries on deaths of children known to Child Protection.

Strategy 11: Accountability and quality assurance

Strategy 11.1: Accountability

Open and accountable government is one of the fundamental commitments made by the Victorian Government to all Victorians.

The Child Protection and Youth Justice service is subject to monitoring by the Ombudsman, the Auditor-General, the Privacy Commissioner, the Child Death Review Committee, as well as the Courts.

The Victorian Government has appointed Victoria's first Child Safety Commissioner. This role includes:

- advising government on where and how the safety of vulnerable children and young people can be improved
- promoting child-friendly and child-safe practices in the Victorian community
- conducting independent review of the proposed Working with Children Check
- advocating on behalf of children in out-of-home care services, promoting a high-quality service system
- undertaking inquiries and reporting on the deaths of children known to Child Protection, and supporting and assisting the Victorian Child Death Review Committee.

The Statewide Plan for Children and the Family and Placement Services Sector Development Plan will set out the performance measures to gauge the effectiveness of government and community-based services in improving the outcomes of vulnerable children and their families.

Action 11.3

The *Children's Bill* provides for:

- the Minister to establish service standards
- the Secretary to register community services that meet those service standards
- external review of services
- remedial actions that may be taken by the Secretary and the Minister if service standards are not met.

All out-of-home care services will need to be registered with the Secretary.

Strategy 11.2: Quality assurance

There is a strong public interest in ensuring the most vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families in Victoria receive services and supports that meet an approved quality standard.

Quality improvement and accountability is consistent with the *Growing Victoria Together* strategy to ensure high-quality and accessible health and community services for all Victorians, including those who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

The current entry-level requirements and levels of accountability for services to the most vulnerable children, young people and families are not commensurate with the levels of risk and responsibility associated with delivering these services. There is no capacity for independent verification of the quality of services provided.

A clear, graduated range of options available to the Government to respond to non-compliance and significant adverse issues is not provided for in existing legislation.

New approaches to quality assurance for these services will be consistent with the new Quality assurance strategy for out-of-home care initiative. This strategy has been developed cooperatively with community service organisations, and provides a framework for monitoring compliance with minimum standards for home-based care services. The new framework for quality assurance is illustrated at Figure 10.

A quality assurance strategy internal review tool has also been developed to help community service organisations collect relevant evidence of compliance with each individual standard. External review will provide for independent validation of internal reviews.

The *Children's Bill* will establish more rigorous quality assurance processes based on:

Registering services that meet service standards

The Bill provides a stronger mechanism for entry-level registration for government-funded child, youth and family services, including family support services, out-of-home care services, and related specialist support services.²

The Bill enables the Secretary to register services which are:

- established to provide services to meet the needs of children requiring care, support, protection or accommodation; and
- will be able to meet the performance standards applicable to community services of that kind.

The Bill will also provide that all out-of-home care services must be registered.

In practice, the Secretary will create different categories of registration, based on the type of service being provided. The Minister will establish some standards that apply to all services. Different categories of services will also be subject to specific standards, reflecting the vulnerability and risk to the child and the level of responsibility of the organisation. More comprehensive standards will therefore apply to out-of-home care services.

² Universal child and family services will not be affected by these changes. They will continue to be subject to the quality assurance requirements under the *Children's Services Act*. A new integrated quality framework will be developed to promote continuous quality improvement among universal services, as recommended by the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee.

Secondary services will require registration to participate in community-based intake and referral services.

Agencies accredited through another process (for example, by a Commonwealth program) will only be required to demonstrate that this accreditation covers the service standards set by the Minister for Children. The Secretary may also provide provisional registration, where there are agencies that meet most service standards, but not all. In such cases, the Department of Human Services will work supportively with the agency to satisfy all service standards.

Transitional arrangements will allow approval of existing services for a period of up to three years, during which time they will be assessed for renewal. Services will then be required to apply for renewal of their approval after three years.

New categories of registration will also provide a basis for new information-sharing arrangements. For example, a secondary service provider registered as a 'designated service' will be authorised to operate a community-based intake and referral service and receive reports on significant concerns about a child's well-being.

Monitoring compliance with the standards

The *Children's Bill* will:

- enable relevant service providers which are funded and administered under this Bill to be monitored for compliance with the standards by an independent, external reviewer
- require services and agencies to make annual declarations of compliance with the standards set by the Minister for Children.

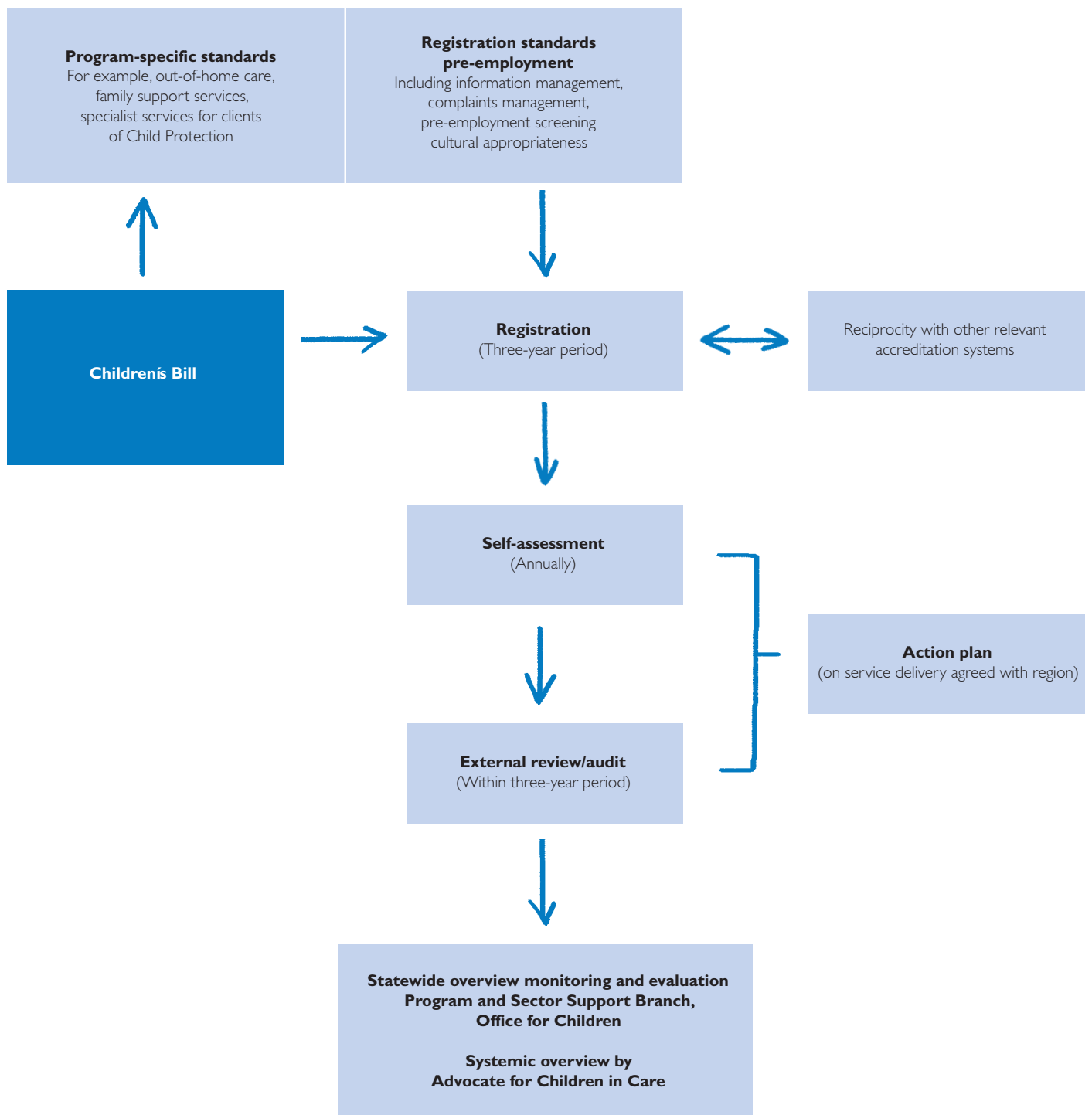
The annual declaration of compliance will lead agencies and services to examine their performance and report failures to meet standards, enabling the Secretary to undertake further examination and remedial action if required.

Monitoring of standards will also be enhanced by the Secretary's power to instigate an independent review at any time, enabling an effective response to any exceptionally adverse reports or incidents.

Service providers will conduct an internal review on an annual basis to support regular monitoring against standards.

External reviews will provide an independent assessment of child, youth and family services' compliance with minimum standards on a continuous three-year cycle.

Figure 10
 Quality assurance for targeted child, youth and family services



Action 11.4

The Department of Human Services will consult with child, youth and family services in preparing guidelines on government intervention when agencies do not meet service standards.

Working with child, youth and family services to meet service standards

Where child, youth and family services do not meet service standards, the focus will be on working supportively with agencies to make the necessary improvements. After each internal and external review has been completed, departmental regional staff will meet with the service to discuss the findings and to develop jointly endorsed action plans to address gaps to continuously improve the quality of services. This is consistent with the Quality assurance strategy for out-of-home care initiative.

The *Children's Bill* also sets out more significant steps that may be taken in response to serious or repeated breaches of service standards. The Bill enables the Secretary to:

- remove some or all Government funding
- appoint a delegate to work with an agency to meet standards
- direct an agency to comply with Government policy
- set conditions on re-registration, or deregister the agency.

The most significant intervention would be for the Governor in Council, on recommendation of the Minister; to appoint a fit and proper person as administrator of a registered agency, if the Minister considers that the agency:

- is inefficiently or incompetently managed

or

- has breached or failed to comply with any provision of the standards or of a funding and services agreement.

The *Children and Young Persons Act* and the *Community Services Act* do not currently include a power to appoint an administrator. This is a power available to the Government in relation to other services, such as disability services.

The Office for Children, within the Department for Human Services, will develop guidelines that set out the criteria for more significant remedial actions. This criteria will be developed in consultation with child, youth and family services, and the guideline will be made available to service providers.

Appropriate appeal processes will be established in relation to any remedial action taken by the Secretary or the Minister. A two-staged appeal process will apply, based on an internal appeal to the Department of Human Services and a further ability to appeal an administrative decision to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

Action 11.5

The *Children's Bill* specifies that children and young people may only be placed in the care of registered out-of-home care services and carers approved by registered agencies.

The Bill also requires the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to maintain a central register of approved foster carers.

Carers

Currently, individual agencies that provide out-of-home care services have approval processes for foster carers and kinship carers, which involve character and police checks.

In order to promote high-quality and safe placements, the *Children's Bill* will strengthen these approval processes by specifying that:

- children and young people may only be placed in the care of registered out-of-home care services and carers approved by registered agencies
- the Secretary of the Department of Human Services will issue guidelines establishing criteria for the approval of foster carers
- the Secretary of the Department of Human Services must maintain a central register of approved foster carers.

The person in charge of a registered agency will have access to the information on the register; in the course of assessing an applicant as a foster carer. The registered community service must notify the Secretary of the approval of any person as a foster carer by that service within 14 days. The registered community service must also notify the Secretary of the withdrawal of approval for a foster carer. This will enable the register to be kept up-to-date.



The Advocate for Children in Care and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Youth Summits will provide opportunities for young people to have a voice about services and supports.

Action 12.1

The government will continue to listen to children, young people, families, and communities about what matters to them in improving outcomes of vulnerable children and vulnerable young people.

Action 12.2

The Advocate for Children in Care will enable children and young people in out-of-home care to provide feedback on their experiences.

Strategy 12: Promoting learning and innovation

Achieving ongoing improvements in the outcomes of children, young people, families and the services that support them will depend on a strong culture of learning and innovation both within and between organisations.

Learning organisations have been described as:

Organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive thinking is nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. (Senge, 1990)

Service development needs to be informed by learnings across a range of disciplines. For example, paediatric medicine, psychologists and experts in child development (both in early years and in adolescence) have provided important insights into the needs of children and young people in out-of-home care. We understand the importance of providing home-like environments, the needs of children and young people's for positive and stable relationships, and the importance of maintaining links with family. The opportunities for children and young people to come to terms emotionally with their experiences are also now better understood.

Children and young people also provide a critical source of information about whether services are meeting their needs and about any gaps in service provision. Organisations like CREATE and events such as the annual youth summits hosted by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare provide important opportunities for young people to provide feedback on their experiences and needs. The Advocate for Children in Care, within the Office for the Child Safety Commissioner, will also assist children and young people to provide feedback on their experiences of being in care. The Government is committed to listening and learning from this feedback to continuously improve our services.

Past experiences, successful or otherwise, are critical sources for learning and ongoing improvement.

The *Forgotten Australians* report (SCARC, 2004) tabled in the Senate on 30 August 2004, and the *Bringing them home* report (HREOC, 1997) provide important sources of learning for future delivery of out-of-home care services. The Government is currently finalising its response to the *Forgotten Australians* report. The Government is committed to using reports such as these to inform the ways in which we will care for children and young people into the future.

Future service and sector development will be informed by analysis of de-identified client data, performance information, program evaluations, and empirical research.

Strategy 12.1: Improving access to and use of data

Robust analysis of rich data is critical to a learning culture. It helps us to understand what has worked or not worked in the past, and the factors to consider in planning for the future.

The Family Support Innovation Projects have shown how data can be used to support innovative responses to local needs. These projects have used Child Protection data to inform the development of varying models for community-based intake and referral services, which reflect differing local demands and priorities. While the service capacity of the projects has predominantly been delivered through family support services, analysis of local child protection data and existing service arrangements has led to targeted enhancements to universal early years services in some areas.

The new Client Relationship Information System for Service Providers will help to strengthen data collection. The information system will be rolled out in the Department of Human Services and community-based child, youth and family services over the next three years.

The new Statewide Outcomes and the Program and Sector Support branches of the Office for Children, will also provide a dedicated focus on strengthening the empirical basis for service development and reform. Together, these branches will drive greater analysis of system data and performance.



Strategy 12.2: Performance measures and evaluation

Initiatives sometimes work well in some areas but not in others. The challenge is to understand why this is the case, and what are the effective factors that lead to successful implementation and sustainable solutions. Sustainable solutions are those that can be replicated across the sector and adapted to local requirements and lead to agreed outcomes being delivered.

Performance measurement and evaluations provide other key sources of learning to inform the future development of policies, programs, services and a skilled workforce. They are valuable tools to assist the service system to build on successful innovations and to adapt critical service elements to the needs of different communities. By providing feedback on the impact of even very small changes, these tools help us to better understand the impact of reforms, including any unintended consequences.

For example, in the United Kingdom, interdisciplinary training was used to support the implementation of their *Children Act 1989*. This approach to training was adopted in order to build a shared understanding of common objectives and a common assessment framework. Training achieved this aim. In addition, joint training sessions helped to reduce differences in work culture between specialist child protection and generalist family support services. Feedback on the additional benefits of this training approach has led to joint training being used as one of the critical drivers of closer collaboration and integration of services.

For these reasons, high priority will be given to evaluating the reforms as a whole, as well as specific initiatives and service models, to monitor whether they are making a positive difference. Evaluations of Family Support Innovation Projects are already underway. Evaluation of family group conferencing is also planned to inform decision-making about its potential broader use and the development of new appropriate dispute resolution models.

A strong focus of all future program evaluations will be to assess available professional reviews into the efficacy of new service responses (in Australia or overseas). Feedback from service providers, children, young people and their families will be used to assess whether services are effective to Victorian circumstances and needs.

Improvements in performance measurement and evaluation will assist in:

- building knowledge and a shared understanding of broad goals and objectives of the service system
- accountability to clients
- change service delivery to drive ongoing improvements in outcomes of children and young people
- improving program implementation and reform
- communicating internally and externally about achievements
- identifying areas of focus for practice-based research.

An outcomes framework for services to children, young people and families was outlined in Part 1 of this White Paper. The primary focus of performance management and evaluations will always be on whether services are making a positive difference in providing children with the best start in life, and giving families and carers the help they need to achieve this. The new Statewide Outcomes Branch in the Office for Children is taking on a research portfolio capacity, and will be involved in encouraging local innovation and evaluation. This branch will also work closely with key stakeholders, such as the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, to facilitate a strong evaluation and learning culture.

Following consultations last year, the proposed *Children's Bill* sets out service principles, which reflect what the Victorian community has said matters the most in the delivery of child, youth and family services. Performance indicators and other evaluations tools will be used to monitor the effective implementation of these service principles, summarised below.

That the service system:

- promotes choice and widens opportunities to access resources and supports
- focuses on early intervention, with supports and services made available for all families, with particular emphasis on supporting the most vulnerable people

That individual services:

- are based on best available knowledge of what children and young people need and how they develop, including research and evaluation of useful interventions and strategies
- acknowledge and promote a child and young person's sense of ethnic, religious, individual and cultural identity
- acknowledge and promote children and young people's stability, recognising the primary responsibility of families
- provide timely decision-making and access to services
- cooperate in coordinating all services that impact on family functioning
- maximise the participation of people in decisions that affect their lives
- protect the rights of individuals in their relationship with services.

Action 12.3

The Department of Human Services will fund a research assistant to support the Alfred Felton Chair of Child and Family Welfare at the University of Melbourne.

Strategy 12.3: Research

In 2004 the Alfred Felton Chair of Child and Family Welfare was established at the University of Melbourne, through a bequest from the Felton Bequest. The Chair is a collaborative initiative between the Centre of Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and the University of Melbourne. It will strengthen the research capacity of child, youth and family services working with vulnerable children, vulnerable young people and their families.

The Government has announced that the Department of Human Services will fund a full-time research position to support the Chair's contribution to a knowledge-based approach to policy and practice in protecting vulnerable children and young people and promoting their healthy development and future well-being.

Research priorities will be identified through collaborative planning processes, and will include the areas of early intervention and prevention, Child Protection, and effective responses to children and young people in out-of-home care who have experienced extreme neglect and abuse.

More generally, practice-based research will be combined with research into opportunities for transferring policies from diverse fields to help us respond to complex problems.

The Government will also continue to promote and participate in national research initiatives.

Action 12.4

The Department of Human Services will work with child, youth and family services and other experts to develop new systems and processes for sharing learning and good practice.

Strategy 12.4: Sharing learning

Strong relationships between the Department of Human Services, Local Government, and community-based child, youth and family services are critical to the transfer and diffusion of innovation within regions, and from one region to another. New governance, partnership and advisory mechanisms connected to the Office for Children to assist in the sharing of learning are discussed later in Part 3 of this White Paper.

The Office for Children will cooperate with peak organisations, as relevant, to inform sector-based learning forums, hosted, for example, by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Services, and the Victorian Council of Social Services.

All 74 White Paper Actions are tabulated in Appendix 4.



The Children's Bill places a responsibility on the Department of Human Services and child, youth and family services to undertake Statewide strategic and sector development planning.

Strategy 13: Integrating planning and sector development

The Family and Placement Services Sector Development Plan will also provide a blueprint for ongoing cooperation on planning and sector development.

In consultations on the legislative reforms, there was strong support among community service organisations to legislate a commitment to ongoing strategic and sector development planning at a Statewide level.

As indicated in Part 1 of this White Paper, the Statewide Plan for Children will focus on the early years of children's development. While there will be an emphasis on supporting vulnerable groups, the plan will have a strong focus on universal early years services.

This White Paper provides a platform for future strategic planning, for more specialist services targeted at vulnerable children, vulnerable young people, and their families.

The new legislation will provide the flexibility to determine an appropriate Statewide planning cycle, which provides a medium-term view on system reform, and aligns with funding and service agreements.

Significant planning is also required at a regional and sub-regional level to support the implementation of reforms. Strong relationships between the Government and community-based services will be critical. For example, the establishment of an integrated family services intake at the local government area or sub-regional level will require planning for cultural and organisational change, as well as decision-making about resource-sharing among agencies. Similarly, more timely and rigorous stability planning will affect all agencies that work with children, young people and families that are subject to a Children's Court order.

Improving the way government works with agencies, professionals and local communities will assist in driving a stronger collaboration on State, regional and local planning. New structures and ways of working are discussed under Strategy 14.

Action 13.1

The Department of Human Services will work with higher education and vocational education providers to ensure that training courses continue to meet the needs of the child, youth and family service system.

Action 13.2

The Department of Human Services will also work with the child, youth and family services sector to:

- develop a clearinghouse of available training opportunities
- maximise joint training between Child Protection and community-based child, youth and family services.

Strategy 13.1: Workforce development

Workforce development and training will be a vital and ongoing part of the sector's development.

Training priorities have been referred to throughout the White Paper and include improved cultural training for child, youth and family services and more comprehensive and consistent training for carers. At the 2004 Youth Summit, one young person also emphasised that:

Training workers in mental health issues and suicide and depression is very important. I'm not asking for a 24-hour psychiatrist to live in the house, but just workers who have some training and sensitivity to young people with mental health problems.

The Department of Human Services will work with higher education and vocational education providers to ensure that courses meet the needs of the child, youth and family service system.

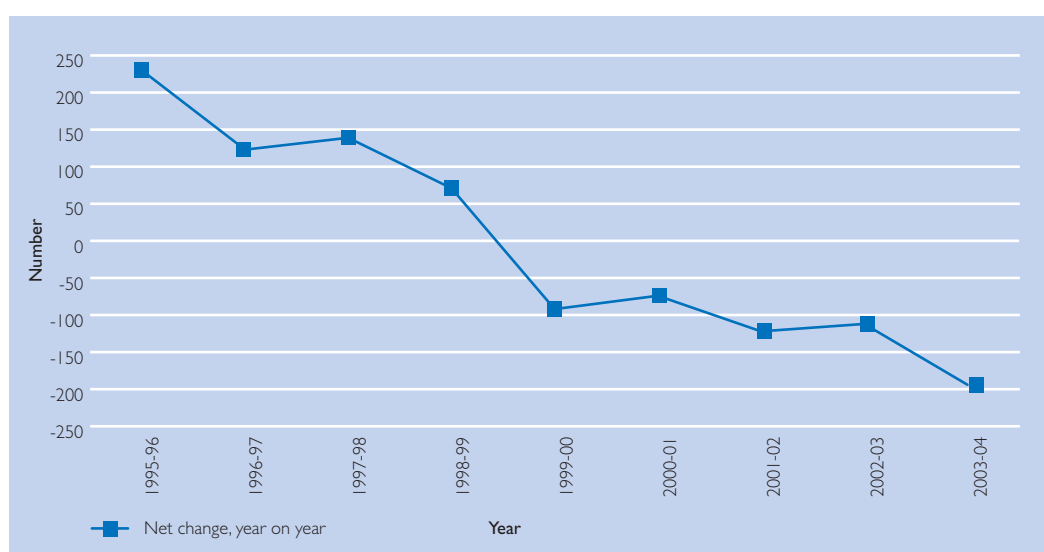
The Department of Human Services will also work with the child, youth and family service sector to develop a training clearinghouse of available training opportunities. The Victorian Council of Social Services will carry out evaluations of the available training. Opportunities for more joint training between Child Protection and community-based child, youth and family services will also be pursued.

Workforce development is important not only for the short term, but for the longer-term development of the right mix of services and supports to meet future demands. For example, research into future projections of demand and workforce capacity for the Family and Placement Services Sector Development Plan has demonstrated that, while total numbers of children in Victoria are expected to drop, numbers of children and young people requiring out-of-home care are likely to continue to grow.

Significantly, in each of the past five years, more foster carers have left the foster care system than have joined it. If this pattern continues, the number of new recruits would fall by more than 70 per cent over the ten years to 2006-07, and by 2016 the number of foster parents would be less than 15 per cent of what it was in 1996. These trends have significant implications for the sustainability of foster care.

Figure 11 illustrates this downwards trend in the net number of foster carers.

Figure 11
Trends in foster care



While the number of new foster carers is decreasing, kinship care is increasing. From 1997-98 to 2001-02, the number of active out-of-home care-givers providing kinship care increased by approximately 50 per cent.

Kinship care is the preferred out-of-home care placement option in Victoria because children and young people benefit from maintaining existing family and community relationships, and experience less trauma and stigma as a result of the separation from their birth parents, plus greater stability (Department of Human Services, 2003, p. 58) and more successful reunifications (Department of Human Services, 2003, p. 53).

Concurrent with this policy direction towards kinship care, demographic changes such as increased participation of women in the workforce, and the increasing complexity of children and young people coming into care, have led to decreasing numbers of people wishing to become or remain foster carers. Kinship care now accounts for approximately 60 per cent of new placement arrangements and comprised 30 per cent of all placements as of June 2004. Projections as part of the Family and Placement Services Sector Development Plan suggest that if current trends continue, the proportion of kinship care placements will exceed those of foster care by 2008-09, with growth in kinship care continuing beyond that time.

Kinship care placements place high demands on carers to manage family tensions, to supervise contact between birth parents and their children, and to meet children's developmental needs. Kinship carers' circumstances can be vulnerable because they are more likely than foster carers to be older (52 per cent over 50 years of age; 54 per cent grandparents, usually grandmothers (Department of Human Services, 2002a)), single (38 per cent (Department of Human Services, 2002a)), and reliant on government pensions or allowances as their principle source of income (47 per cent (Department of Human Services, 2002a)). The Department of Human Services'

Action 13.3

The Department of Human Services will work with child, youth and family services to monitor and assess workforce capacity and development needs.

Child Protection Service is responsible for assessing kinship carers, establishing placements, and providing ongoing support. However, the support that can be provided by Child Protection case managers, with the competing demands of that role, is limited, and often less than that provided to other home-based carers by community service organisations.

These data have important implications for future policy and planning around out-of-home care, in terms of monitoring the quality of care provision and the sustainability of both kinship and foster care as models of out-of-home care. Alternate models for out-of-home care provision will need to be explored to meet future demand, as well as appropriate supports for foster and kinship carers.

Similar research into workforce demographics and patterns is planned for family support services under the Family and Placement Services Sector Development Plan. Future analysis will also examine workforce issues for universal and secondary child, youth and family services.



Strategy 14: Building strong relationships within child, youth and family services and across government

Strategy 14.1: Working better with government

The new directions for child, youth and family services need to inform, complement and align with both current policy and the new developments in other government initiatives. Key areas to be considered include:

- Best Start projects
- Primary Care Partnerships' Strategic Directions
- Neighbourhood Renewal projects
- Mental Health Services New Directions
- *Hospital Demand Management Strategy*
- *Juvenile Justice Drug Policy and Strategy*
- development of neighbourhood houses in disadvantaged areas to provide a hub for community and voluntary groups
- Community Health Services Policy Framework
- increasing access to affordable housing
- implementing the *Victorian Homelessness Strategy* and the *Youth Homelessness Action Plan*
- strengthening and improving the coordination of family support services
- increasing support for children with disabilities and their families, including more early-intervention services
- new strategies to accommodate disability within employment
- Department of Victorian Communities' place-based projects
- Department of Education and Training
- adult drug services.

Action 14.1

The *Child Well-being and Safety Bill* will guide the operation of the Victorian Children's Council.

Action 14.2

The Victorian Children's Council will advise government on how children and young people are faring in Victoria.

Action 14.3

The *Child Well-being and Safety Bill* will guide the operation of the Children's Services Coordination Board.

Action 14.4

The Secretary of the Department of Human Services will chair a Children's Services Coordination Board. This board will monitor the impact of government policies, programs and services on vulnerable children and young people.

Action 14.5

The government will continue to work with local government and child, youth and family services to align local government planning in new infrastructure with the needs of vulnerable children, young people and families.

Whole-of-government cooperation

Machinery-of-government changes will help to support a more coordinated, whole-of-government approach to delivering services to children and young people.

The **Victorian Children's Council** will be established to provide high-level policy advice to the Premier and the Minister for Children, as recommended by the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee. The council will consist of recognised experts in children's policies and services.

The **Children's Services Coordination Board** will boost the level of coordination and cooperation across the Government. The board will consist of Secretaries of the Departments of Premier and Cabinet, Treasury and Finance, Human Services, Education and Training, Justice and Victorian Communities, as well as the Chief Commissioner for Police. It will monitor the impact of policies, programs and services for children and young people across government functions, and measure whether coordination is occurring.

The **Ministerial Advisory Committee** will continue to advise the Minister for Children on policy issues specific to vulnerable children and youth.

Working across government functions at a regional and local level

The Department of Human Services is working closely with the Department for Victorian Communities to ensure that cross-government approaches to localising, and better coordination of service delivery, complement each other. This will be facilitated by the recent announcement by the Government to align departmental regional boundaries. The establishment of regional management forums in each region, supported by community project teams, will help to achieve more flexible and integrated service delivery, providing a regional mechanism to address issues that require a 'joined-up' response from the Government to improve services to communities.

Strong relationships with local governments are critical to an integrated child, youth and family service system. Local government already makes a vital contribution to the outcomes of vulnerable children and young people, through strategies such as the Municipal Early Years Plan and councils' role in delivering services. The Government will continue to work with local government to support local planning to align social and physical infrastructure development with the needs of vulnerable children, vulnerable young people, and their families.

Action 14.6

Regional offices of the Department of Human Services will ensure their structures work effectively with the administrative arrangements for the Office for Children.

All 74 White Paper Actions are tabulated in Appendix 4.

Working with the Office for Children

Strong relationships between government and child, youth and family services are essential to achieving shared objectives and collaborative approaches to quality, planning, innovation, and sector development. Creating an outcomes framework provides an opportunity to reconsider the ways in which the department works with child, youth and family services.

The Office for Children has redesigned its internal administrative arrangements to provide a more open and coordinated structure, with:

- a strong focus on early childhood
- a more dedicated policy and strategic planning capacity
- stronger links between family support programs, Child Protection and out-of-home care programs
- stronger links between programs targeted at vulnerable young people.

Regional offices of the Department of Human Services are currently reviewing their own structures to:

- ensure that management responsibilities for family support services work effectively with new arrangements in the Office for Children
- establish governance arrangements to support the redesign of regional/sub-regional service delivery boundaries (discussed earlier) and stronger local service networks.

In addition, the Office for Children is currently reviewing its existing range of governance and advisory structures, as part of the Family and Placement Services Sector Development Plan.

Governance and advisory mechanisms will be streamlined so that experts and agencies can effectively participate in service, sector and policy development. Structures will have a clear purpose related to high level, whole-of-government policy advice, policy and service coordination, and driving more integrated approaches to service delivery.

More coordinated structures within the Department of Human Services and more streamlined arrangements for working with the child, youth and family service sector will support better planning, integration and targeting of services to meet the needs of vulnerable children and vulnerable young people and their families.



Strategy 14.2: More effective sharing of information

Actions to improve the sharing of aggregated data to inform the design and development of services were discussed earlier in Part 3 of the White Paper. Information-sharing also needs to occur about individual children, young people and families to protect children and young people from harm, to protect their rights, and to promote their development.

The need for better information-sharing was highlighted by the Victorian Child Death Review Committee, which identified inadequate communication as a specific issue in 30 cases between 1999 and 2004.

The current *Children and Young Persons Act* enables Child Protection to obtain and disclose information necessary to receive a notification and investigate it.

There is currently uncertainty about who can share information, and for what purposes, when:

- the proposed community-based intake and referral services receive concerns about a child, and the threshold for Child Protection investigation has not been met
- Child Protection completes its initial investigation, and either takes no further action or proceeds with case management.

Reforms to strengthen information-sharing are fundamental to building a coherent and effective network of child, youth and family services, to enable earlier intervention and prevention, and to strengthen collaboration between Child Protection and community-based child, youth and family services.

Secondary child, youth and family services

Under new arrangements set out in the *Children's Bill*, community-based referral and intake services will be able to receive reports on significant concerns about the well-being of a child or young person. Secondary community services must be registered with the Secretary to operate these community-based intake and referral services.

Registered secondary services will be able to consult with Child Protection and a specified list of local services, including Victoria Police, mental health services, drug and alcohol services, disability services, and housing services. These services will also be explicitly authorised to receive information from, and provide information to, the community-based intake and referral service.

This sharing of information without a family's consent will only be allowed for the purposes of risk assessment and determining which is the appropriate agency to engage the family. Ongoing disclosure of information between agencies for the purposes of coordinating service delivery will require the consent of the family.

Action 14.7

The *Children's Bill* provides a contemporary framework for information sharing based on:

- authorising the collection, handling and use, and disclosure of information by child, youth and family services
- authorising a specific list of services to receive and provide information to community-based intake and referral services
- authorising the same services (including other child, youth and family services) to share information with Child Protection
- empowering the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to require certain professionals to disclose information about a child or young person who is the subject of a Children's Court protection order.

Child Protection

As is currently the case, the Secretary will be able to request other service providers to provide information to inform a Child Protection investigation. This head of power provides sufficient authority for organisations to disclose information to the Secretary. The Bill will require families to be informed of reports as part of the investigation.

Where Child Protection is involved with a family beyond an initial investigation, and without court involvement, new provisions of the *Children's Bill* will empower the Secretary to request other services to provide information to inform case planning and case management. This power will continue while a substantiated risk of significant harm for a child or young person remains, and will provide sufficient authority for other organisations to disclose information to the Secretary.

While a protection order is in force, the Secretary will also be authorised to request information. However, where information will not be provided voluntarily, the *Children's Bill* empowers the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to require disclosure of information (orally or in writing) in order to inform ongoing investigations, case planning and case management, and reports to the Children's Court.

Strong cooperative relationships, and requesting the voluntary provision of information, will continue to be the preferred way of working. The power to compel information will be used as a last resort or in emergency situations. Safeguards will be established to ensure the appropriate use of the compulsion power as follows:

- The Children's Court must have found that the child or young person is in need of protection and so placed the child or young person on a protection order.
- The Secretary can only require disclosure of information considered relevant to the protection or development of the child or young person.
- The authority will be limited to specified classes of professionals working with the child or young person and family (set out in the exposure draft of the *Children's Bill*).
- There will be strict limits on the Secretary's ability to delegate this power. Only Department of Human Services regional and executive directors will be permitted to act on the Secretary's behalf in directing professionals to make disclosures.
- Information collected under this authority will not be admissible in any other court proceeding, and an exemption because of self-incrimination will apply.
- The authority will override medical privilege, but not legal privilege.

Out-of-home care services and other specialist services

Out-of-home care services and other specialist services delivered to children and young people involved in Child Protection will also be authorised to collect, handle, use and disclose information. The *Children's Bill* will enable these services to share information with Child Protection and the other health and community services, in order to protect a child or young person, and promote their healthy development. Authorisations will only apply in relation to children and young people who have been assessed by Child Protection as being in need of protection.

Action 14.8

The Department of Human Services will work with the Department of Justice to develop guidelines for Child Protection and child, youth and family services on appropriate collection, handling, use and disclosure of information, including through the new client relationship information system.

Action 14.9

The *Children's Bill* establishes a presumption that a clinic report should be released by the Children's Court to parties to a court proceeding unless

- release of the report to the Department of Human Services would be prejudicial to the development or mental health of the child
- release of the report to any other party would be prejudicial to the development or mental health of the child or to the physical or mental health of another party.

The Privacy Commissioner will continue to have jurisdiction over complaints about interferences with privacy in the child protection context. All aspects of the use and disclosure of personal information in the Child Protection regime will fall within the jurisdiction of the Privacy Commissioner, except as otherwise authorised in the Bill (for example, the Privacy Commissioner will not be entitled to see notifier or reporter details).

Children's Court Clinic reports

The Children's Court Clinic undertakes assessments of children, young people and families, on the request of the Children's Court, to inform Court decision-making. These Clinic Reports also provide an important source of information about children's needs and family circumstances, which can inform Child Protection's ongoing case planning with the family.

The *Children's Bill* proposes new provisions to guide the release of reports prepared by the Children's Court Clinic.

Reflecting current practice, the Bill provides for the Children's Court to determine whether reports should be made available to the Department of Human Services, parents, and other parties to a Children's Court matter (as well as to their legal representatives).

The Bill establishes a presumption that a clinic report should be released to parties to a Children's Court proceeding unless:

- release of the report to the Department of Human Services would be prejudicial to the development or mental health of the child
- release of the report to any other party would be prejudicial to the development or mental health of the child or to the physical or mental health of another party.

Under proposed arrangements, the Children's Court will advise the Court on release of the report. The Court will also be required to take account of the views and wishes of the child or parent who has been the subject of a clinic assessment.

Additional safeguards

Additional safeguards for information sharing will include:

- standards for information management to form part of the registration of community service organisations
- the Department of Human Services and the Department of Justice working together to ensure that appropriate documentation explaining the particular collection, use and disclosure regime applicable to the new Act is developed, and made available to the public
- security features of the new Department of Human Services Integrated Client and Case Management System
- the development of standardised privacy collection notices for child, youth and family services
- a new penalty for the unauthorised use of information.



next steps

This White Paper, Protecting Children ... the next steps describes a new service model for the delivery of child, youth and family services in Victoria. It sets out key actions to protect and nurture children and young people through to adulthood.

Many of the actions set out in this paper describe the next steps in implementing reforms that are already underway. Other actions profile new areas for work involved in building the new service model.

These actions represent the next step in a long-term approach to reform (see Figure 12).

The White Paper will provide the platform for further policy, service and sector development over the next five to ten years. New initiatives described throughout the White Paper will be further developed and rolled out according to the Government's usual decision-making processes about resource availability.

The Government is committed to monitoring the progress, and evaluating the outcomes, of changes in legislation, policy, service delivery, and systems management. Over the next 12 months, clear measures will be defined through the processes set out in Strategy 1. These outcome measures will help us to focus on the issues that are important to the lives of vulnerable children and vulnerable young people in Victoria.

Strong relationships with communities, and child, youth and family services and other key experts, will be needed to take the Government's reform agenda forward and to identify issues for future action. The Government welcomes your involvement in the further development of specific elements of the new service model.

Figure 12
Framework for
reform

Strategy 1: Vulnerable children and vulnerable young people are protected and nurtured to adulthood

Strategy 1: Vulnerable children and vulnerable young people are protected and nurtured to adulthood
across the domains of safety, learning, health, development and well-being. In specifying and monitoring these outcomes, attention will be given to the particular needs of vulnerable groups, including their stability, participation in learning and local communities and a positive sense of identity.

Strategy 2: Supporting families and communities to care for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people
so that:

- families are enabled to provide effective care in the child's best interests
- strong communities value children and young people, respect diversity, value culture and build resilience and connectedness of children, young people and families.



Strategy 3: Establishing an integrated child, youth and family service system

so that Victoria has the right mix of quality services, which are integrated, culturally responsive and meet changing and varied needs, to promote positive outcomes, intervene early and prevent harm.

Part 2: Changes in service delivery: creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage

Changes in service delivery: creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage

Strategy 4:

Ensuring that universal services provide equal opportunity for all

Strategy 5:

Reducing barriers to opportunity, including through earlier intervention and prevention

Strategy 6:

Providing coordinated services, that better meet local needs

Strategy 7:

Targeting assistance to priority populations and the highest areas of risk

Strategy 8:

Appropriate dispute resolution: involving children, young people, families and communities in decision-making

Strategy 9:

Making it easier to work with government

Part 3: Administering the service system to achieve outcomes

Part 3: Administering the service system to achieve outcomes

Strategy 10: Building shared objectives

in order to place children and young people's best interests at the heart of decision-making and service delivery opportunity for all

Strategy 11: Accountability and quality assurance

Standards, common tools and guidelines and compliance processes to promote high quality and culturally competent services

Strategy 12: Promoting learning and innovation

Continually improving quality, including through performance measurement, research, evaluation and sharing of innovation and good practice

Strategy 13: Integrating planning and sector development

Building a flexible, skilled workforce, timely and effective services, necessary infrastructure and productive and sustainable organisations

Strategy 14: Strong relationships with child, youth and family services and across government

Supported by information sharing



Glossary of unusual and specialist terms

Aboriginal Child Placement Principle	The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle is a nationally agreed principle endorsed by the States and Territories and which promotes the placement of Aboriginal children within their community, and, where this is not possible, promotes the continuing connection of the child to that community.
Act	see legislation
Appropriate Dispute Resolution (ADR)	Refers to processes, other than judicial determination, in which an impartial person (an ADR practitioner) assists those in a dispute to resolve the issues between them.
adversarial	Hearings are referred to as 'adversarial' because each party tries to establish their case and disprove the other parties case, rather than seeking common ground, compromise and agreement.
Advocate for Children in Care	The Advocate for Children in Care reports to the Child Safety Commissioner on matters relevant to the safety and well-being of children placed in out-of-home care.
Bill	see legislation
blended families	Blended families are two-parent families where some or all of the children living in the family are not the natural children of both parents.
case management	Case management is the coordination and delivery of services provided as part of a case plan.
case planning	Case planning is the decision-making process undertaken where support or intervention services are provided to families and children, and which sets goals, responsibilities and review processes.
catchment area	A catchment area is the geographical area for which the service is provided – for example a local government area.
charter of rights	A charter of rights for children in care will acknowledge and target the specific issues and vulnerabilities experienced by children who cannot live safely at home and are therefore living with alternative carers. It will provide guidance on children's rights. A discussion paper released by the Advocate for Children in Care has also sought feedback on whether the charter should also set out the responsibilities of children and of the service system, to give effect to the charter of rights.
child protection	Child protection is an area of social regulation by government, which involves the local community, community agencies, professionals working with children, police and government working together to keep children and young people safe from harm. The Victorian Government's approach to child protection recognises the rights and responsibilities of parents to care for their children, and their right to privacy. But if there is evidence of suspected abuse or neglect, the Government recognises the rights of children and young people to protection.

Child Protection Service	<p>The Child Protection Service operates within the Department of Human Services and is authorised by law to intervene, coercively if necessary, to protect children and young people. The Victorian Child Protection Service is specifically targeted to those children and young people at risk of significant harm. Services include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • investigation of child abuse and neglect • case management and support services for abused children and young people • intensive work with families to identify actions that need to be taken, or services and supports that are required, to ensure the safety of the child • provision of advice to the Children's Court, which may lead to the Court prescribing requirements that the parents must meet to ensure their children are not at risk of harm and, where necessary, placement of children with alternate carers • out-of-home care programs • support services to assist clients in transition to family reunification or independent living.
Child Safety Commissioner	<p>The Child Safety Commissioner is a statutory officer who provides advice to the Minister for Children on the promotion of child-friendly and child-safe practices in Victoria.</p>
Children's Services Coordination Board	<p>This Board includes Secretaries from the Departments of Human Services, Premier and Cabinet, Treasury and Finance, Justice, Education and Training, and Victorian Communities, as well as the Chief Commissioner of Police. The board will monitor the impact of policies, programs and services that impact on children and young people across government functions. It will also monitor the coordination of government actions and identify opportunities for improvement.</p>
co-location	<p>Co-location of Child Protection and community-based intake and referral services would involve these services operating from the same premises. Each service would retain its own governance and management structures and its own accountability arrangements. Co-location will not be compulsory or mandatory. It is one option to facilitate cooperation and collaboration between Child Protection and secondary services.</p>
community-based referral	<p>see intake services, referral services</p>
Criminal Division	<p>The Criminal Division of the Children's Court hears matters involving young people who have been charged with an offence. For detailed information, see the entry titled 'Recent reforms to the Criminal Division' in the section 'Internet resources cited in the White Paper'.</p>
cross-sectorial collaboration	<p>Cross-sectorial collaboration refers to joint planning and service delivery between the child and family services sector and other service sectors such as health, mental health, education and so on.</p>
custody order	<p>Custody and guardianship orders are orders made by the Children's Court that place a child in the care of someone other than their parent.</p>

declaration of compliance	Each year, child, youth and family services will be required to certify that their agencies have complied with service standards set by the Minister. This certification will be provided through a standard form, to be known as an 'annual declaration of compliance'.
diversionary role	Diversion refers to the provision of services in order to address problems and prevent the need for tertiary intervention.
early years services	Early years services are those services provided to children and families in the years from birth to school attendance.
Family Group Conferencing	A Family Group Conference is a meeting held with members of the extended family to make plans for a child or young person. Family Group Conferences currently happen when the Department of Human Services has assessed that there is abuse or neglect, or where a child or young person is on a Protection Order from the Children's Court, or where a child is being relinquished. The purpose of this meeting is to bring family members together so they can make decisions about the child or young person. Meetings can be held in a home, or another location, if preferred. Child protection workers will explain what risks there are to the child or young person's safety and the reasons for their involvement. Family members can then make decisions to ensure the safety and well-being of the child or young person. Meetings may take up to three hours, and are run by an independent convener.
foster carer	A foster carer is someone approved by a foster care program to provide a home and care for other people's children.
group conferencing	A group conference is a formal meeting of persons affected by the commission of an offence by a child. A group conference develops an outcome plan to assist the child to take responsibility, to reduce the likelihood of re-offending, and to provide reparation (if relevant).
guardianship order	see custody order
Innovation Project sites	Innovation Project sites are those local government areas in which a Family Support Innovation Project is operating.
intake services	<p>Community-based intake and referral services: Currently, many families are referred to child, youth and family services through Child Protection. In the future it is intended to establish two distinct pathways into services. Child Protection will maintain its own intake service for high-risk families where it is considered that a child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm. Child Protection and the Children's Court will continue to have statutory powers to require families to take certain actions.</p> <p>Secondary child, youth and family services will also provide a common contact point (in a local area). This intake and referral point will receive referrals about families where it is considered that a family is facing severe stresses that are impacting on a child's well-being and where there are concerns about the parents' capacity to deal with those stresses. The intake and referral service will seek to engage families in appropriate services, often involving intensive family support services. It will provide a preliminary assessment of the range of services a family may need, and help the family to access those services. A family's involvement in assessment and ongoing services will be voluntary.</p>

Juvenile Justice	Juvenile Justice is the name of the program delivered by the Department of Human Services to provide services to young offenders. Its name is being changed to Youth Justice.
kinship care	Kinship care is care provided to a child by a relative. For Aboriginal children this may involve any adult member of their community.
lead agency	A lead agency is an agency that provides a contact point to receive referrals about children, young people and families experiencing problems, on behalf of other child, youth and family services in the locality.
legislation	Legislation is the Act or Acts of Parliament that govern a particular field of activity. An Act of Parliament is a Bill, like the Bills currently being consulted upon, and which has been passed by both Houses of Parliament.
Office for Children	The Office for Children is that part of the Department of Human Services which sets policies and coordinates the provision of services to vulnerable children and families.
out-of-home care	Out-of-home care refers to care provided to children placed away from their parents and extended family for their own safety.
place-based service initiatives	A placed-based approach to service development and delivery ensures that services become more localised, better coordinated, and more relevant to the needs of individual communities.
placement	In the context of child protection, this refers to the provision of out-of-home care services.
pre-hearing conferences	A pre-hearing conference is the means, under the current <i>Children and Young Persons Act 1989</i> , of providing a forum to try to resolve disputes prior to a full contested court hearing.
Primary Care Partnerships	Primary Care Partnerships are voluntary alliances comprising health care agencies, medical services, and local government, and organisations such as sport clubs, child care agencies and schools.
protection order	A protection order is an order made by the Family Division of the Children's Court for the protection and care of a child.
protective intervenor	A protective intervenor is someone authorised by the legislation to receive and investigate reports that a child is in need of protection.
referral services	A child, youth and family service that is managing an intake and referral service may deliver services to a family itself or may refer a family to another health or community service. A referral is simply a communication from one professional to another, to recommend that a family receive a particular service.
referral tools	Referral tools are the terms, assessment frameworks, communication methods and documentation used in describing why a particular family requires a particular service, and links the family into another service.
registered agency	see service registration
registration	see service registration
residential care services	Residential care services are accommodation services for young people that have rostered staff, as contrasted, for example, with foster parents.

restorative justice principles	Three principles form the foundation of restorative justice: 1) justice requires that we work to restore those who have been injured; 2) those most directly involved and affected by crime should have the opportunity to participate fully in the response if they wish; 3) government's role is to preserve a just public order, and the community's role is to build and maintain a just peace. For more information, see 'Recent reforms to the Criminal Division' in the section titled 'Internet resources cited in the White Paper'.
restorative justice program	Restorative justice is a theory of justice that emphasises repairing the harm caused, or revealed, by criminal behaviour. It is best accomplished through cooperative processes that include all stakeholders.
reunification	Reunification means returning the child to the care of their parents.
secondary services	Secondary services target vulnerable groups or communities who need more intensive support as a result of their particular needs or circumstances. The aims of secondary services are to build family strengths and to reduce risks to the child and young person. Examples include intensive family support services, respite care, community-based mental health services, and drug and alcohol services.
secure welfare	A secure welfare service is defined under the current <i>Children and Young Persons Act</i> as 'a community service that has lock-up facilities'. A young person may be placed in Secure Welfare by the Children's Court, generally at a point prior to an on-going protection order such as a supervision order or 'custody to the Secretary' order being made. The Secretary of the Department of Human Services may also place a young person in secure welfare who is in custody or guardianship of the Secretary. By either path, the threshold is the same. A child or young person must be at substantial and immediate risk of harm to himself or herself. An initial placement of a maximum of 21 days can be made, with the potential, in exceptional circumstances, for a further extension up to 21 days.
service continuum	In order to build a shared responsibility to protect vulnerable children and young people and to promote their healthy development, it is helpful to conceptualise individual child, youth and family services as part of a service system. Different services may have a specific function and target group. Implicit in the concept of a service continuum, is the idea of all these services working together to ensure that vulnerable children, vulnerable young people and their families receive the mix and intensity of services they need.
service registration	A new registration system will provide a more rigorous and consistent approach to quality assurance for child, youth and family services. Those services that can demonstrate they are able to meet quality standards will be placed on an approved register of services by the Secretary of the Department of Human Services. The Secretary will also publish funding guidelines, which explain the type of services which must be registered to be eligible for Government funding.
service standards	Service standards will be published by the Minister, and consist of quality and performance requirements that services will have to comply with in order to be registered as approved services.
stability plan	A stability plan is a component of a Child Protection case plan, which outlines how a child will receive continuous, stable care away from home. A stability plan for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child or young person must demonstrate compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. See also Kinship care, stability planning.

stability planning	Stability planning means the process of decision-making by the Secretary that ensures that children are provided with opportunities to form stable attachments and relationships with adults caring for them, so as to enable a child's healthy development. Stability planning will underpin actions to preserve families and to reunify children with their parents quickly if they are removed from home - so that a child experiences continuous, stable relationships with their parents. If a child cannot live safely at home, stability planning will lead to the development of a stability plan to provide for stable care by someone other than the child's parents. See also Stability plan.
step-down services	While in secure welfare, young people often access therapeutic treatment. For example, young people may access the Take Two service, which provides intensive therapeutic counselling and multiple treatment methods aimed at addressing trauma and attachment disorders. Step-down services, often known as transitional services, would provide continuing treatment and support to young people who have been in secure welfare and are moving back to out-of-home care. The aims are to help the young person to cope with the transition from secure welfare and to prevent further risk-taking behaviour. (The Take Two program is described in the section titled 'List of major programs cited in White Paper').
sub-regional	There are eight Department of Human Services regions in Victoria, and each contains several local government areas. Where services are provided on a sub-regional basis, they are provided to one or more local government areas, but not to the entire Department of Human Services region.
temporary assessment order	Where families refuse to cooperate, and impede an investigation, Child Protection will be able to apply to the Children's Court for a temporary assessment order, if Child Protection has a reasonable suspicion that the child or young person is, or is likely to be, in need of protection. The Court may make this order in conjunction with a warrant authorising police to enter and search premises to locate the child. The order will direct parents to cooperate with a Child Protection investigation and may have other conditions, such as authorising and requiring assessments, including a medical examination of the child.
tertiary services	Tertiary services target children who have experienced significant harm or who are likely to suffer harm. The main aim of these services is to redress this harm and prevent its recurrence. Examples include Child Protection, therapeutic services aimed at children and young people who have experienced serious abuse, and out-of-home care services.
therapeutic service/s	A therapeutic service delivered through the Take Two program is a service aimed at assisting a child or young person in out-of-home care to deal with the effects of past trauma and abuse.
therapeutic treatment order	A therapeutic treatment order will require a child exhibiting sexually abusive behaviour aged 10 to 14 years of age to attend treatment.

threshold	<p>The Government's reforms aim to better target responses to more serious allegations of abuse and neglect, while concurrently providing access to a range of services for families who have high needs and face ongoing problems. The <i>Children's Bill</i> provides guidance on when secondary child, youth and family services should work with a family on a voluntary basis, and when Child Protection needs to be involved.</p> <p>The <i>Children and Young Persons Act 1989</i> sets out the basis for protective interventions by Child Protection. The <i>Children's Bill</i> provides for Child Protection to continue to conduct investigations and work intensively with high-risk families, where it is considered that a child or young person has suffered, or is likely to suffer significant harm.</p> <p>Currently, the <i>Children and Young Persons Act 1989</i> and the <i>Community Services Act 1970</i> do not define when a secondary child, youth and family service should seek to engage a family into services voluntarily. The <i>Children's Bill</i> proposes that child, youth and family services should seek to engage families (through community-based intake and referral services) when there are significant concerns about the well-being of a child. This would mean that a secondary child, youth and family service would accept referrals about families facing severe stresses and problems that are impacting on a child's well-being, and where there are concerns about the parents' capacity to deal with those stresses.</p> <p>Secondary services and Child Protection will be able to consult with one another and refer families to the most appropriate intake service.</p>
universal services	<p>Universal services are available to all children in the community and aim to promote child well-being, including health, education and social development objectives. Examples are general practitioners, maternal and child health services, child care centres, and schools.</p> <p>Sometimes universal services will target vulnerable groups or communities and aim to build protective or resilience dimensions in these communities. Although widely available, they might not be accessed by the whole community. Examples include Enhanced Maternal and Child Health home visiting schemes and school breakfast programs, which are founded on population-based assessments of risk and need.</p>
Victorian Children's Council	The Victorian Children's Council is an expert body advising Government on policy and service development in relation to children and families.
White Paper	A White Paper is published by government when it wants to set out its policies and plans on a particular issue. In this instance, as is often the case, the White Papers invites public comment on legislative proposals.
whole-of-government	A whole-of-government focus, in relation to this White Paper, refers to the fact that all government polices and departments must have regard to children's well-being and safety, and that this is not just a concern of, or cause for action by, the Minister for Children and the Department of Human Services.
youth attendance order (YAO)	A youth attendance order (YAO) is a sentence given by the Children's Court. A YAO is a community-based disposition that is a direct alternative to receiving a custodial sentence. A young person on a YAO is required to report to a juvenile justice unit for up to ten hours per week, and involves a community service work component.
Youth Justice	see Juvenile Justice



List of major programs cited in the White Paper

Aboriginal Family Decision Making

Aboriginal Family Decision Making (AFDM) is a culturally-based approach to decision-making and planning with Aboriginal families about the safety needs of their children and how these can be met. Referrals to the program from Child Protection are considered once abuse or neglect of an Aboriginal child is substantiated. The AFDM conveners - one from Department of Human Services and one from the Aboriginal community - meet with the family and relevant community members to make decisions about how to respond to protective concerns and keep the child safe in future.

The model utilises traditional Aboriginal approaches to solving family problems and involves Aboriginal Elders and the extended family of the child. The AFDM model allows Aboriginal families the opportunity to meet and explore options to improve their family situation in a supported cultural environment.

Aboriginal family preservation services see **Aboriginal Family Preservation Program**

Aboriginal Family Preservation Program

The Aboriginal Family Preservation Program was modelled after the NSW program Malanee Bugilmah Intensive Family Based Support Services, and based on the United States' Home Builders program, introduced in Victoria as Families First. The goal of the Aboriginal Family Preservation Program is to work intensively over a short time (3-4 months) with families referred by Child Protection who are at imminent risk of having their child removed, or to facilitate the safe return of children to their families.

Aboriginal Family Restoration Programs

Aboriginal Family Restoration Programs aim to prevent future harm and disadvantage for the most at-risk Aboriginal children by strengthening their parents' capacity to safely care for them, and by reducing their over-representation in the out-of-home care system. The programs are based upon a holistic response to Aboriginal family breakdown to ensure the safety of Aboriginal children where there is a risk of the child being placed in out-of-home care.

Best Start

Best Start is a joint project between the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education that aims to improve the health, development, learning and well-being of all Victorian children, from before birth through to school. Best Start supports communities, parents, Elders, families and service providers to improve early years services so they are more responsive to local needs.

Connecting To Communities

Connecting to Communities is a program aimed at transferring the management of out-of-home care placements for Aboriginal children and young people from mainstream agencies to Aboriginal-controlled organisations.

Family Support Innovation Projects

Family Support Innovation Projects provide a range of activities that may include the provision of: intake, active engagement (including assertive outreach), assessment, case management, counselling, casework, in-home support, group work, brokerage, as well as other support and information activities. In most cases an initial assessment will be conducted with the family to determine the level, priority and type of service required.

The Family Support Innovation Projects aim to divert a significant proportion of families currently notified to child protection services to community-based services, and to minimise client renotifications and the progression of families into the Child Protection system, and provide an improved service capacity for families who may not come into contact with child protection services.

Finding Solutions

Finding Solutions is a State-wide mediation program to engage rapidly with young people and their families to provide mediation and support that helps them address the issues leading to potential family breakdown and to divert them from further involvement in the Child Protection and placement system.

Koori Maternity Services providers

In partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), recurrent funding is provided to support and evaluate a program to enhance existing community-based Koori health services in providing additional and culturally appropriate support to Koori women during pregnancy, birth, and the postnatal period. The Government funds eight Aboriginal Cooperatives to provide culturally appropriate support to Koori women during these stages of motherhood.

Looking After Children

Looking After Children (LAC) is a joint initiative of the 39 community service organisations across Victoria that deliver out-of-home care services for children and young people, and the Department of Human Services. Looking After Children provides a framework for identifying the needs of children and young people and developing plans to meet these needs. At a simple level, the LAC framework attempts to strengthen communication and collaboration between carers, departmental staff, community service organisation staff, other associated professionals, clients and their families. It prompts all parties involved to consider the things any good parent would naturally consider when caring for their own children. It also provides community service organisations with a common framework for their client records systems and which contains all the information they require to look after a child or young person in the care of their organisation.

Municipal early years plans

Local governments are introducing municipal early years plans. These plans will focus on the development and coordination of local services for children and their families, accounting for the identified needs of families and communities at a local level. Their requirements will be determined through a project being undertaken by the Municipal Association of Victoria, in partnership with the Department of Human Services and local governments. These plans are intended to complement municipal public health plans and Community Health Plans, ensuring a focus on support for families with young children as part of an integrated municipal planning process. They will provide a broad planning framework for local family and children's services. Within this context, they will articulate the priorities of individual local governments in the delivery of the Maternal and Child Health Service.

Secure welfare

A secure welfare service is defined under the current *Children and Young Persons Act* as 'a community service that has lock-up facilities'. A young person may be placed in Secure Welfare by the Children's Court, generally at a point prior to an on-going protection order such as a supervision order or custody to the Secretary order being made. The Secretary of the Department of Human Services may also place a young person in secure welfare who is in custody or guardianship of the Secretary. By either path, the threshold is the same. A child or young person must be at substantial and immediate risk of harm to himself or herself. An initial placement of a maximum of 21 days can be made, with the potential in exceptional circumstances of a further extension of up to 21 days.

Take Two

The Intensive Treatment Service (Take Two) aims to improve the functioning, safety and well-being of children and young people subject to Child Protection intervention through the provision of specialist intensive therapeutic counselling and multiple treatment methods aimed at addressing trauma and attachment disorders involving children, their families, and carers and communities where necessary. Take Two works in close association with each regional Child Protection program and is developing a range of tools for use by Child Protection Managers and practitioners to assess and measure outcomes, and which help to inform the most effective approach to take for each individual.

Youth Justice Group Conferencing

A group conference is a formal meeting of persons affected by the commission of an offence by a child. It brings together the victim, the young offender, their families and community supports to address the concerns and issues relevant to each party. The group conference develops an outcome plan to assist the child to take responsibility for their actions and reduce the likelihood of re-offending, and also to provide reparation.

Internet resources cited in the White Paper

Department of Human Services

Protecting children Website: www.dhs.vic.gov.au/protectingchildren

The Victorian Government wants to hear Victorian's views on the likely effect of the legislative changes discussed in this White Paper and how those changes will achieve the Government's policy and service reforms. Copies of the draft *Children's Bill* and other information about this consultation process are available at this Website.

Consultations on the exposure draft of the *Children's Bill* will take place across Victoria throughout August and September 2005. A guide to the new provisions within the *Children's Bill* and the key changes to the current *Children and Young Persons Act* and the *Community Services Act* will assist with a layperson's interpretation of the legislation. This guide, *Protecting children: a guide to the Children's Bill* can also be accessed on the Protecting children project Website.

Existing Victorian Government policy statements

A Fairer Victoria, creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage: www.dpc.vic.gov.au
This document contains the Government's action plan to address disadvantage.

Growing Victoria Together: www.dpc.vic.gov.au
This document sets out the Government's priorities for the next ten years. The vision was first released in November 2001, and was refreshed in March 2005 to reflect emerging community needs and concerns.

Putting Children First ... the next steps:
www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au
This document describes the Government's aspirations for children, from birth through to school.

Recent reforms to the Criminal Division

www.dhs.vic.gov.au/juvenilejustice

The exposure draft of the *Children's Bill* (see 'Department of Human Services' above) includes amendments to Criminal Division provisions of the existing *Children and Young Persons Act*. In particular, these amendments will replace references to 'juvenile justice' with 'youth justice' and introduce group conferencing in youth justice proceedings. Group conferencing is a restorative justice program that has operated as a pilot for a number of years. Other changes include provisions relating to change of name applications by young people undergoing sentences of detention. More detail on the age changes to the Criminal Division and other recent reforms to the Criminal Division is available at this Website.

The Youth Justice Group Conferencing Program

www.restorativejustice.org

This is a community rehabilitation intervention program based on restorative justice principles and which is available to the Children's Court at the pre-sentence stage. The group conferencing program aims to divert young offenders aged 10 to 17 years who would otherwise be placed on Youth Justice supervised orders, such as probation.

List of references

Note: Internet references cited in the White Paper point to multiple sources of information. These are listed in the section titled 'Internet resources cited in the White Paper' and are accompanied by a description of each resource.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Characteristics of vulnerable children and vulnerable young people, and their families, in Victoria

The circumstances and characteristics of those Victorian children, young people and families whose needs are at the centre of this White Paper are becoming better known both within government and across the community. The Department of Human Services has collected a range of social and demographic data, in order to predict demand for particular groups to 2015-16.

In summary, data and research have shown:

- Family problems have become more complex over the past 20 years.
- Problems are linked to structural factors, such as long-term poverty, unemployment, lower affordability of housing and homelessness.
- Problems are also linked to substance abuse, family violence, disability and mental health conditions.
- Of children first placed in care in 2001-02, 77 per cent had parents with one or more of these concerning characteristics. Between 1995 and 2002, the proportion with two or more of these characteristics rose from 9 per cent to 44 per cent.
- For some parents, these factors are affecting their ability to protect and nurture their children and young people for significant periods of time.
- As a result, more children and young people cannot live safely at home. The numbers of children and young people out of home grew by 27 per cent between 1996 and 2004.
- The length of time spent (continuously) in out-of-home care has also increased, from an average of one and a half years in 2000-01 to two and a half years in 2003-04.
- These trends are expected to continue.
- While the total numbers of children are expected to decrease over the next 11 years, it is predicted that the numbers of children who cannot live at home with their birth parents will grow by more than 20 per cent by 2015-16.
- Family violence, and misuse of legal and illicit drugs, is expected to have the most significant effect on family support and out-of-home care services over the next decade.

Table 3 provides some more detail on demographic research undertaken in Victoria and its implications for vulnerable children, young people and their families.

Table 3

The effect of demographic changes on children, young people and families

Demographic change	The effect on families	The impact on children and young people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of children and young people in Victoria is expected to fall by about 4.3 per cent by 2016. • Growth will be heavily concentrated in inner Melbourne and in six local government areas: Cardinia, Melton, Wyndham, Casey, Whittlesea, and the City of Melbourne. • Projections are very different for Aboriginal children. • It is expected that the number of Aboriginal children and Aboriginal young people will increase by about 40 per cent by 2016. • Aboriginal children are already more than ten times more likely to participate in Child Protection and out-of-home care. • Based on current projections, this over-representation is set to continue. • Family structures have changed over the past 20 years. Growth in family breakdown has resulted in more single-parent families. This pattern is expected to continue. • Children from single-parent families are twice as likely as children from couple families to require out-of-home care. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental capacity can be affected by structural and individual factors. • Structural factors include long-term poverty, unemployment, lower affordability of housing, and homelessness. • Individual factors include substance abuse, family violence, disability, and mental health conditions. • Of children first placed in care in 2001-02, 77 per cent had parents with one or more of these concerning characteristics. • The proportion with two or more of these characteristics rose from 9 per cent to 44 per cent. • Sometimes the effects are temporary, and children continue to be nurtured and protected. • Sometimes parents' ability to protect and nurture their children can be affected for significant periods of time. • Family violence and misuse of legal and illicit drugs are expected to have the most significant effect on the number of family and placement services over the next decade. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health and learning are both critical to children's development in the early years. • International research demonstrates that quality early child programs, especially at age four, improve children's subsequent learning, health and behaviour, with positive impacts extending into adult life. • The impact is more marked for children who experience economic disadvantage and other circumstances (such as low parental capacity) that place them at risk of school failure. • New scientific knowledge about the impact of environmental factors and relationships on the brain development of children has also shown the importance of positive and stable relationships, especially in the critical early years. • Growing numbers of vulnerable children and young people are not experiencing stable care. Too often, children are moving between home and multiple out-of-home care placements. • Instability of care can delay children's cognitive, social, emotional, psychological and moral development. • Resulting learning difficulties, low self-esteem, behavioural and emotional problems can set children back for life.

Appendix 2: Proposed principles for the Child Well-being and Safety Bill

Your views are sought on the principles contained within the *Child Well-being and Safety Bill*.

These principles are:

1. All children should be able to grow up actively learning, healthy, sociable and safe, irrespective of their family circumstances and background.
2. Families have primary responsibility for the upbringing, healthy development and protection of their children within the community.
3. The preferred way of ensuring the well-being of all children is through providing families with access to the information, services and resources useful to assist in raising children.
4. Communities, community services and government all have responsibility for strengthening the capacity of families to participate in their local communities and for strengthening the capacity of parents to provide appropriate care for their children.
5. Social inclusion of the most vulnerable children and families should be supported.
6. If family members are unwilling or unable to provide a child with adequate care and protection, it is the responsibility of the Government to ensure that the child's care and protection is provided for:
7. The widest possible protection and assistance should be given to the family as the fundamental group unit of society. The State must ensure that intervention into family life should be to the minimum extent that is necessary to secure the safety and well-being of the child.
8. The provision and future development of services for children and families should be coordinated and should ensure that services are widely known, in order to promote choice and widen opportunities to access resources and supports.

Services should:

9. focus on early intervention with supports and services made available for all families, with particular emphasis on assisting the community to support the most vulnerable, protect children from harm, protect their rights, and promote their development.
10. be based on best available knowledge of what children need and how they develop, including research and evaluation of useful interventions and strategies.
11. take account of the child's social and individual identity, including cultural background, religious faith, if any, in which the child is being raised; age, maturity, sex, and sexual identity.
12. provide timely decision-making and access to services, being mindful of the potential harmful effects resulting from any delay.
13. maximise the participation of people in decisions that affect their lives.
14. protect the rights of individuals in their relationship with services and service providers.

Appendix 3: Reform chronology

The actions set out in *Protecting children ... the next steps* have been shaped by a series of policy and legislative reviews, Ministerial statements and whole-of-government policy frameworks released over the past five years. The reform chronology is set out below.

2000	Ministerial statement, <i>A Balanced Approach to Juvenile Justice in Victoria</i>
2001	Audits of children and young people in residential, home-based and kinship care (Department of Human Services)
2002	Integrated strategy for Child Protection and Placement Services (Department of Human Services) A Strategic Framework for Family Services (Department of Human Services) <i>Respect: The Government's Vision for Young People.</i> (Office for Youth)
2003	<i>Public Parenting: A review of home-based care in Victoria</i> (Department of Human Services) <i>Pathways to partnership: the final report of the Out-of-home Care Partnership Case Study Review</i> (Department of Human Services) Ministerial statement, <i>Putting Victoria's Children First</i> <i>Protecting children: the Child Protection Outcomes Project</i> (The Allen Consulting Group) Aboriginal communities and community-controlled agencies' response to the Child Protection Outcomes Project (coordinated by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency)
2004	<i>The report of the Panel to oversee the consultation on Protecting Children: the Child Protection Outcomes Project</i> (Independent panel chaired by Peter Kirby, with Arie Freiberg and Lisa Ward) Protecting children: ten priorities for children's well-being and safety in Victoria (Government response to the Kirby Panel) <i>Protecting children: Technical Options Paper</i> (Department of Human Services) Ministerial statement <i>Putting children first ... the next steps</i>
2005	<i>A Fairer Victoria: creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage</i> Evaluations of Best Start and Family Support Innovation Projects

Appendix 4: Summary of strategies and actions

Responsibility for action plans: *Protecting children ... the next steps White Paper*

Strategy 1: Vulnerable children and young people are protected and nurtured to adulthood

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
1.1	1.1 The Government, in conjunction with the Victorian Children's Council, will prepare a Statewide Plan for Children. In the first instance, this plan will focus on what children need in order to do well in early childhood.	
1.2	1.2 The Department of Human Services will work with early years services to develop and implement a quality framework for early years services to promote continuous quality improvement among these services.	
1.3	1.3 The Department of Human Services will work with secondary services, Child Protection and out-of-home care services to develop and implement a quality framework for child, youth and family services.	
1.4, 1.5	1.4 A charter of rights for children in care will be developed by the Advocate for Children in Care.	1.5 The <i>Children's Bill</i> makes the Secretary responsible for implementing the charter of rights for children in care.
1.6, 1.7	1.6 The Department of Human Services will work with Aboriginal communities and community-controlled agencies to develop and implement a charter for Aboriginal children's well-being and safety.	1.7 The <i>Child Well-being and Safety Bill</i> will make the Secretary responsible for implementing the charter for Aboriginal children's well-being and safety.
1.8	1.8 The Department of Human Services will develop new and quality frameworks for youth justice and youth services targeted at vulnerable youth.	

Strategy 2: Supporting families and communities to care for vulnerable children and vulnerable young people

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
2.1	2.1 The Victorian Government will continue to invest in strategies to strengthen communities that have high levels of disadvantage, to improve opportunities for residents and build positive networks of support within the community.	
2.3	2.3 The Government will monitor progress in strengthening communities through <i>Growing Victoria Together</i> reporting.	
2.2.	2.2 The Department of Human Services will set out clear measures for vulnerable families: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a quality framework for early years services • a quality framework for child, youth and family services. 	

Strategy 3: Establishing an integrated child, youth and family service system

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
3.1	3.1 The Department of Human Services will work with non-government child, youth and family services to develop a Family and Placement Services Sector Development Plan.	
3.2	3.2 The Sector Development Plan will spell out measures to support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • better-integrated child, youth and family services • earlier intervention and prevention • diverting children, young people and families from Child Protection. 	

Strategy 4: Ensuring that universal services provide equal opportunity for all

Strategy 5: Reducing barriers to opportunity, including through earlier intervention and prevention

Government	Department of Human Services	Children’s Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
5.1	<p>5.1 The Department of Human Services will work in partnership with secondary child, youth and family services to establish community-based intake and referral services across Victoria.</p>	
5.2	<p>5.2 The Department of Human Services will work with secondary child, youth and family services to develop a decision-making tool for use in all new community-based intake and referral services and by Child Protection. This will provide a first step in developing a more comprehensive common risk and needs assessment framework to ensure consistent decision-making across Child Protection and community child, youth and family services.</p>	
5.3	<p>5.3 The <i>Children’s Bill</i> makes the Secretary responsible for working with community services to promote the development of common policies on risk and needs assessment for vulnerable children, young people and families.</p>	
5.4		<p>5.4 The <i>Children’s Bill</i> provides for Child Protection to assess reports and either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • classify the report as a notification and investigate it • provide advice or consultation to support a professional or service provider working with a family • refer a report to a community-based intake for appropriate assistance.
5.5		<p>5.5 The <i>Children’s Bill</i> provides for a new temporary assessment order. This court order would enable Child Protection to investigate notifications more thoroughly where parents will not cooperate.</p>
5.6, 5.7	<p>5.7 On receipt of a report about an unborn child, Child Protection will work with health and community services to plan appropriate services and supports for the mother to reduce risks to the child after its birth.</p>	<p>5.6 In order to assist vulnerable mothers to provide adequate care, the Bill enables Child Protection and community child, youth and family services to receive reports about unborn children who are likely to be at risk of harm after they are born.</p>

Strategy 5: Reducing barriers to opportunity, including through earlier intervention and prevention (continued)

Government	Department of Human Services	Children’s Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
5.8, 5.11	<p>5.11 The Department of Human Services will work with treatment agencies to assess the current capacity to meet demand resulting from the introduction of therapeutic treatment orders.</p>	<p>5.8 The Bill will also create a new pathway into treatment for children aged 10 to 14 years who exhibit serious sexual behaviour. Under new provisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Protection will be able to bring an application to the court under a new protective ground and • the Children’s Court will be able to direct treatment (and placement away from home for the purposes of treatment).
5.9		<p>5.9 The <i>Children’s Bill</i> will enable the Criminal Division of the Children’s Court to refer a matter to Child Protection.</p>
5.10		<p>5.10 The <i>Children’s Bill</i> also requires the establishment of a Therapeutic Treatment Board to advise the Secretary of the Department of Human Services and the Director for Public Prosecutions on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • whether a child has exhibited sexually abusive behaviour • whether a criminal or protective intervention is appropriate.

Strategy 6: Providing coordinated services that better meet local needs

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
6.1	<p>6.1 The Department of Human Services will work with secondary child, youth and family services to align catchment areas for community-based intake and referral services with Child Protection and other place-based initiatives (such as Primary Care Partnerships), wherever this is appropriate.</p>	
6.2	<p>6.2 The Department of Human Services will work with secondary child, youth and family services to develop consistent tools for referring families between services. To the greatest extent possible, new referral tools will be compatible with referral tools used by other health and community services.</p>	
6.3	<p>6.3 The Department of Human Services will continue to explore more flexible funding models to enable local child, youth and family services to work together and more intensively with families.</p>	
6.4	<p>6.4 The Department of Human Services will ensure that up-to-date and effective protocols are in place to protect children and young people and to promote their health, learning, well-being and development.</p>	
6.5	<p>6.5 The Department of Human Services will also assist secondary child, youth and family services to develop effective protocols as appropriate.</p>	
6.6	<p>6.6 The Department of Human Services will establish indicators in the child, youth and family services quality framework, to monitor progress in redesigning local service networks.</p>	
6.7	<p>6.7 Regional positions will be created within the Department of Human Services to support closer relationships between community-based intake and referral services and Child Protection. These positions will also help to support and drive the redesign of local service networks.</p>	

Strategy 7: Targeting assistance to priority populations and the highest areas of risk

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
7.1	<p>7.1 Where a child or young person is removed from home, Child Protection and health and community services will work intensively with parents to access services and supports to maximise the opportunities for children and young people to return home quickly and safely.</p>	
7.2 7.3	<p>7.3 The Department of Human Services will establish stability planning frameworks to support informed and structured decision-making about long-term care arrangements for children and young people.</p>	<p>7.2 The <i>Children's Bill</i> will require Child Protection to make stability case plans within mandated timeframes according to a child or young person's age.</p>
7.4	<p>7.4 The Department of Human Services will establish quality assurance processes for stability planning.</p>	
7.9	<p>7.9 The Department of Human Services will work with Aboriginal communities to develop culturally appropriate models for stability planning and out-of-home care.</p>	
7.5, 7.6	<p>7.5 The Department of Human Services will better support Aboriginal families through in-home support for new mothers, four new Aboriginal Best Start projects, and an Aboriginal family restoration program.</p>	<p>7.6 The <i>Children's Bill</i> will require Child Protection and community services to comply with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. The <i>Children's Bill</i> will also require Child Protection to demonstrate compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle before the Children's Court can make a permanent care order.</p>
7.7	<p>7.7 The Department of Human Services will implement the new Connecting to Care Program, which will involve working with Aboriginal communities and mainstream out-of-home care services to transfer the management of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care placements to community-controlled organisations.</p>	
7.8	<p>7.8 Recruitment of Aboriginal carers, particularly kinship carers, will be aided by the Department of Human Services taking action to improve training and support to Aboriginal carers.</p>	

Strategy 7: Targeting assistance to priority populations and the highest areas of risk (continued)

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
7.10, 7.11	<p>7.11 The Department of Human Services will work with community-controlled organisations to build skills and capacity so that responsibility for case management and case planning can be transferred from the Secretary to the heads of approved Aboriginal organisations.</p>	<p>7.10 The <i>Children's Bill</i> enables the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to authorise heads of approved Aboriginal organisations to assume responsibility for managing Children's Court protection orders relating to an Aboriginal child or young person. Approval would be granted on a case-by-case basis.</p>
7.12	<p>7.12 The recently established Protecting Children Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Working Group will provide a stronger focus on cultural diversity in policies and services for children, young people and families within the Department of Human Services' Office for Children.</p>	
7.13		<p>7.13 The Government will continue to develop better ways of providing culturally appropriate youth justice services for Aboriginal young people.</p>
7.14	<p>7.14 The Department of Human Services will work with out-of-home care services to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strengthen the service model for kinship care • develop therapeutic services and models of care to support young people with complex needs. 	
7.15, 7.16, 7.17	<p>7.16 In order to assist young people leaving care to make the transition to independent living, Child Protection will be responsible for developing case plans to prepare young people for leaving care.</p>	<p>7.15 The <i>Children's Bill</i> places a responsibility on the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to assist young people up to the age of 21 to make the transition from out-of-home care to independent living.</p>
7.18	<p>7.18 The Department of Human Services will work with early childhood intervention services to implement the 2004-05 budget initiatives to better support children with a disability or developmental delay.</p>	

Strategy 8: Appropriate dispute resolution: involving children, young people, families and communities in decision-making

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
8.1	8.1 The Department of Human Services will work with community-controlled organisations to roll out Aboriginal family decision-making programs across Victoria.	
8.2		8.2 The <i>Children's Bill</i> enables the use of group conferencing at the pre-sentence stage of Criminal Division proceedings within the Children's Court.
8.3	8.3 The Department of Human Services will work with the Children's Court, the Department of Justice and other key experts to develop new models of appropriate dispute resolution to apply once an application has been made to the Family Division of the Children's Court.	

Strategy 9: Making it easier to work with government

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
9.1	9.1 In order to streamline administrative requirements for non-government services, the Department of Human Services will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> streamline care-giver payments roll out a new Client Relationship Information System for Service Providers. 	

Strategy 10: Building shared objectives in order to place children and young people's best interests at the heart of decision-making and service delivery

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
10.1		10.1 The <i>Children's Bill</i> requires Child Protection, community services and the Children's Court to apply the 'best interests' principle as the paramount consideration in all decision-making and service delivery.

Strategy 11: Accountability and quality assurance

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
11.1, 11.2	<p>11.2 The Child Safety Commissioner will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advise on the safety of vulnerable children and young people in Victoria • promote child-friendly and safe practices in the Victorian community • monitor and promote high quality out-of-home care services • undertake inquiries on deaths of children known to Child Protection. 	<p>11.1 The <i>Child Well-being and Safety Bill</i> will guide the operation of the Child Safety Commissioner (including the Advocate for Children in Care).</p>
11.3 11.4	<p>11.4 The Department of Human Services will consult with child, youth and family services in preparing guidelines on government intervention when agencies do not meet service standards.</p>	<p>11.3 The <i>Children's Bill</i> provides for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Minister to establish service standards • the Secretary to register community services that meet those service standards • external review of services • remedial actions that may be taken by the Secretary and the Minister if service standards are not met.
11.5		<p>11.5 The <i>Children's Bill</i> specifies that children and young people may only be placed in the care of registered out-of-home care services and carers approved by registered agencies. The Bill also requires the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to maintain a central register of approved foster carers.</p>

Strategy 12: Promoting learning and innovation

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
12.1	12.1 The Government will continue to listen to children, young people, families, and communities about what matters to them in improving outcomes for vulnerable children and young people.	
12.2	12.2 The Advocate for Children in Care will enable children and young people in out-of-home care to provide feedback on their experiences.	
12.3	12.3 The Department of Human Services will fund a research assistant to support the Alfred Felton Chair of Child and Family Welfare at the University of Melbourne.	
12.4	12.4 The Department of Human Services will work with child, youth and family services and other experts to develop new systems and processes for sharing learning and good practice.	

Strategy 13: Integrating planning and sector development

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
13.1	13.1 The Department of Human Services will work with higher education and vocational education providers to ensure that training courses continue to meet the needs of the child, youth and family service system.	
13.2	13.2 The Department of Human Services will also work with the child, youth and family services sector to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop a clearinghouse of available training opportunities • maximise joint training between Child Protection and community-based child, youth and family services. 	
13.3	13.3 The Department of Human Services will work with child, youth and family services to monitor and assess workforce capacity and development needs.	

Strategy 14: Building strong relationships with child, youth and family services and across government

Government	Department of Human Services	Children's Bill/Child Well-being and Safety Bill
14.1, 14.2	14.2 The Victorian Children's Council will advise government on how children and young people are faring in Victoria.	14.1 The <i>Child Well-being and Safety Bill</i> will guide the operation of the Victorian Children's Council.
14.3, 14.4	14.4 The Secretary of the Department of Human Services will chair a Children's Services Coordination Board. This board will monitor the impact of government policies, programs and services on vulnerable children and young people.	14.3 The <i>Child Well-being and Safety Bill</i> will guide the operation of the Children's Services Coordination Board.
14.5, 14.6	14.5 The Government will continue to work with local government and child, youth and family services to align local government planning in new infrastructure with the needs of vulnerable children, young people and families.	14.6 Regional offices of the Department of Human Services will ensure their structures work effectively with the administrative arrangements for the Office for Children.
14.7, 14.8	14.8 The Department of Human Services will work with the Department of Justice to develop guidelines for Child Protection and child, youth and family services on appropriate collection, handling, use and disclosure of information, including through the new client relationship information system for service providers.	14.7 The <i>Children's Bill</i> provides a contemporary framework for information sharing based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • authorising the collection, handling and use, and disclosure of information by child, youth and family services • authorising a specific list of services to receive and provide information to community-based intake and referral services • authorising the same services (including other child, youth and family services) to share information with Child Protection • empowering the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to require certain professionals to disclose information about a child or young person who is the subject of a Children's Court protection order.
14.9		14.9 The <i>Children's Bill</i> establishes a presumption that a clinic report should be released by the Children's Court to parties to a court proceeding unless: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Release of the report to the Department of Human Services would be prejudicial to the development or mental health of the child • Release of the report to any other party would be prejudicial to the development or mental health of the child or to the physical or mental health of another party

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The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every entry should be supported by a valid receipt or invoice. This not only helps in tracking expenses but also ensures compliance with tax regulations.

In the second section, the author provides a detailed breakdown of the company's revenue streams. This includes sales from various product lines and services. The analysis shows that while one product line is currently the primary source of income, diversification into new markets is essential for long-term growth.

The third section addresses the company's financial health and liquidity. It highlights the need for a robust cash flow management strategy to ensure that all operational needs are met. The author suggests implementing regular financial reviews to identify potential areas of concern early on.

Finally, the document concludes with recommendations for future strategic planning. It suggests that the company should focus on innovation and research and development to stay competitive in a rapidly changing market. Additionally, strengthening the company's financial foundation through prudent budgeting and cost control is a top priority.