

Directions for out-of-home care

May 2009



Introducing directions for out-of-home care



Last August, I asked young people in out-of-home care for their views on Victoria's care system. They were enthusiastic and up front in telling me what they thought. In their discussions with me they raised many things that they liked about their care, but there were also things they told me they wanted changed. In particular, one young person in Residential Care commented that *'workers change so often you just don't know who you'll wake up to'*.

We have a special responsibility to this young person and other children in care, not just under legislation, but a more fundamental obligation, like good parents, to meet their needs as they grow up. This document charts directions for a care system driven by the needs of children and young people. It is a commitment to a 'child first' approach to everything we do in providing care. This is not a new objective but we are now directing renewed effort to re-shaping our out-of-home care services to get it right for children and young people.

The document also has a clear message. We know that acting in the child's best interest means we must strive to provide certainty and stability for children and young people. This is about supporting and developing families so children can stay with their families and grow up in their care. If this is not possible, it is our obligation to make sure children and young people live in a safe, stable and nurturing environment.

The Victorian Government has kick started this reform agenda with \$135 million over four years in the 2009-10 State Budget. This funding will be used to place a greater focus on family-based services to prevent at-risk children being removed from home or to reunite removed children with their families as quickly as possible.

At the same time we will also be increasing the capacity of out-of-home care with a range of extra placements, from home-based care to specialist care placements that can provide alternatives to Residential Care for children under 12 years of age. We will also need to make significant changes 'behind the scenes' to our culture, operations and funding structures to make sure the needs of children and young people shape our systems and processes.

Over the next twelve months we will be working closely with our partners in the community sector to develop an agreed reform agenda detailing how we will deliver these improvements.

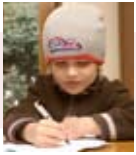
This is the big task before us. It is fundamental to our vision for a fairer Victoria where all members of our community can prosper. We want to continue to hear your views and welcome your ongoing contribution as we work together to translate our new directions into better outcomes for children and young people in our care.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lisa Neville', written in a cursive style.

The Hon Lisa Neville MP
Minister for Community Services

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Where we've come from

Victoria has a well earned reputation for progressive child protection, placement and family services policy and high quality services.

Over the last 20 years, policy and service delivery in out-of-home care has undergone several phases of reform with the closure of the large institutions and a move to community-based Residential Care during the 1980s.

From the 1960s to 1980s, almost all children and young people subject to some form of court order spent time at the government-run state institutions of Allambie, Turana, Baltara or Winlaton during their time in care. The implementation of the *Children and Young Persons Act 1989* resulted in a separation of services for children and young people who needed care and protection from those where a young person had committed an offence. The last large scale reception centre, Allambie, closed in 1990.

Out-of-home care underwent significant change in the 1990s. The introduction of mandatory reporting in 1993, and the growing number of children and young people entering out-of-home care with more complex and challenging needs led to a move away from family group homes to a focus on rostered Residential Care for children and young people. The redevelopment of accommodation and support services saw home-based services strengthened and expanded with the introduction of a more flexible mix of services, including specialised home-based care, shared family care, semi-independent residences and the expansion of the Adolescent Community Placement and Foster Care programs. During the mid 1990s there was a greater recognition of kith and kin networks, which were formalised with the development of standards and guidelines in 1996.

Since the late 1990s, the preferred out-of-home care option for children and young people removed by child protection is within their wider family or community. On any given night, there are currently around 2150 children and young people placed with relatives/kin; 1550 in Foster Care; 500 in Residential Care and 1550 in Permanent Care¹.

Over the past ten years there has been investment in successful reforms across the broader child protection system, including:

- the introduction of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, which enshrines children's best interests at the heart of all decision-making; and
- significant investment in earlier and more intensive support to families through the establishment of the Family Support Innovations projects and ChildFIRST.

Since this government came to office in 1999 the funding for out-of-home care has almost doubled with an additional investment totalling \$95.5 million between 1999-00 and 2008-09. Service enhancements to the out-of-home care system over this time have included:

- focusing on children and young people's recovery from trauma of abuse – through funding for the Take Two Intensive Therapeutic Service and the CIRCLE Therapeutic Foster Care program and piloting Therapeutic Residential Care including two pilots designed specifically for Aboriginal² children and young people;
- supporting a quality care system – the introduction of the Looking After Children best practice framework to assess and plan for children and young people's needs, the register of approved carers and establishing a registration and independent review system for all Community Service Organisations (CSOs) delivering out-of-home care services;

¹ Average occupancy for 2008-09 financial year, for nine months through to 30 March.

² In this document the word *Aboriginal* includes the Indigenous peoples of both Australia and the Torres Strait Islands.



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- better preparing young people for the transition to adulthood – establishing leaving care support services for young people who leave care at 18 years of age;
- caring for the whole child – developing local partnerships with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) to advocate for the educational needs of students in care, introducing health assessments for children and young people upon first entering care and improving children’s stability, especially in the critical early childhood years;
- highlighting culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal children and young people – including recognising the value of Aboriginal culture in the Best Interest Principles governing all decision-making in Victoria, keeping Aboriginal children and young people better connected to their culture and community when in care and strengthening the cultural responsiveness of CSOs;
- strengthening support for carers – the assessment and training of carers, the development of a general carer handbook and a handbook to assist with meeting the needs of Aboriginal children and young people and an increase in the reimbursements provided to carers to assist with meeting the costs of caring for the children and young people in out-of-home care;
- developing the workforce – building the capability of the Residential Care workforce by funding a range of short-term and ongoing forums, and the development of a strong partnership with the TAFE sector;
- reviewing and designing a new model of Kinship Care to improve support for kinship carers; and
- providing additional funding to develop a state wide Foster Care communication and recruitment strategy, resulting in the recent launch of the *Fostering A Brighter Future* media campaign.

The number of Victorian children and young people entering care is at an eight year low. This has been achieved by a decade of policy initiatives that focus on the safety and wellbeing of Victorian children and young people.

Already much has been achieved, but there is still more to be done if all Victorian children and young people are to have the same choices and opportunities to succeed. We know that children and young people are staying significantly longer in care and outcomes for these children, in relation to their wellbeing, development and future opportunities, are still lower than their peers in the general population.

Reform directions

Victoria's new out-of-home care agenda is based on the following reform directions:

Reform direction 1: Support children to remain at home with their families

Fifty-six per cent of children and young people entering care for the first time leave care within six months. This suggests that with more support, these children and young people may have been able to stay at home. New family-based interventions will aim to prevent at-risk children and young people being removed from home. For children and young people who for some reason, cannot live safely at home, we will work with their parents to address problems and build capacity so they can go home as soon as it is considered safe.

Reform direction 2: A better choice of care placement

Our care services are having difficulty keeping pace with growing demand and the increasingly complex needs of children in care. The increase in the overall number of children in care is not because more children are entering care – the numbers are decreasing – but because the average length of stay in the system is increasing. We will increase care options to meet the diverse and increasingly complex needs of our children. Immediate actions to ensure that a range of appropriate placements are available when the placement decision is being made include:

- recruiting up to 100 expert practitioners to provide intensive care in their homes, initially for children under 12 who are currently in Residential Care;
- re-shaping the out-of-home care system to better meet the complex needs of adolescents;
- increasing the number of home-based care placements to meet demand; and
- piloting therapeutic treatment approaches, to ensure that therapeutic treatment in Residential Care is as effective as possible.

Reform direction 3: Promote wellbeing

Wellbeing is vital to the lives of children and young people. It enables them to lead enjoyable and fulfilling lives and underpins achievement at school and in adult life. Secure attachment and friendship, healthy eating, the pursuit of hobbies, access to sporting and other positive activities and avoidance of risky behaviours are all important factors that make a major contribution to wellbeing. Immediate actions to promote the wellbeing of children and young people in care include:

- expanding the therapeutic component in our care services; and
- introducing a new community mentoring program for young people in Residential Care.

In addition, the 2009-10 State Budget will boost the capacity of the outreach service for young people who are vulnerable to street-based sex and drug related exploitation.



Reform direction 4: Prepare young people who are leaving care to make the transition into adult life

Young people in care may lack the family support network available to other adolescents. They are consequently at greater risk of experiencing a difficult adulthood. This underscores why a successful transition from care is so important. The government will build on the leaving care support introduced as part of the implementation of the new *Children Youth and Families Act 2005*. A better placement experience in childhood will also support young people in developing the skills for a successful future.

Reform directions 5: Improve the education of children in care

There remains a significant gap in the education outcomes of children and young people in care compared with their peers. The Department of Human Services (DHS) and DEECD will develop proposals for consideration to improve the education of children and young in care. These include investigating a range of innovative educational approaches for children and young people in out-of-home care such as tutoring support and scholarships to encourage educational completion at secondary and tertiary levels. The Partnering Agreement between DHS and DEECD is the foundation for our action plan to improve the education outcomes of children and young people in care.

Reform direction 6: Develop effective and culturally appropriate responses for the high numbers of Aboriginal children in our care

Connection to culture, kin and community is vital to us all, but for Aboriginal children and young people it is also the basis for moving forward. Actions under each direction will pay particular attention to the needs of Aboriginal children and their families and will be delivered in collaboration with Aboriginal communities. For example, the above mentioned family-based interventions and placement options will have components tailored to the specific needs of Aboriginal children, young people and their families. In addition, we will better meet the needs of Aboriginal children in care with increased support by training CSOs to improve their cultural competency.

Reform direction 7: A child-focused system and processes

The new directions set out above establish a clear agenda for strengthening families and improving the outcomes of children in care. However, for these actions to really benefit children and families the way we all work will require change. Firstly, it will require actively seeking out and listening to the voices of children and young people in care. It will also require changes to decision-making processes, service planning and funding frameworks. This will ensure that there is alignment between these elements and our new directions and enable resources to be appropriately matched to children's needs. More flexible funding processes are required so, for example, we can provide support packages that can adequately respond to the range of adolescents' developmental needs and presenting issues.





Making it happen

The following section provides a broad overview of the government's plans for out-of-home care. This summary identifies priorities for action and further proposals that will be considered over the next five years.

The priority actions will commence in 2009–10 with the assistance of a funding commitment of \$135 million over four years made in this year's State Budget. These actions address gaps in current service delivery and trial new service delivery models where considerable lead time is required to achieve change.

In the immediate future there will be extensive dialogue with all our stakeholders, including children and young people in care to help steer change. The Coalition for Change to be held in July 2009 will also have a particular focus on out-of-home care reform. This agenda will also evolve to draw on emerging good practice across each of the reform directions.

Reform agenda for out-of-home care

Phase 1: Immediate actions

Strengthening families

Support children at home with their families

- \$19.1 million over the next four years to pilot new models of intensive family-based interventions to prevent children and young people from needing to come into care, and to resettle them with their families after being in care.

A better choice of care placements

- \$47 million over the next four years to reshape the out-of-home care system to better meet the diverse needs of adolescents.
- \$23 million over the next four years to recruit expert practitioners to provide intensive care in their homes, initially focusing on children under 12 who are currently in Residential Care.
- \$14 million over four years to enable placement services to better meet the complex needs of the young people in general Residential Care.
- \$19 million over the next four years to fund caregiver reimbursements for home-based care placements.
- Continue the development and evaluation of therapeutic Residential Care through piloting of various models across the state.
- Expand training for Residential Care workers in dealing with trauma.
- Implement a support system aimed at improving the stability and quality of Kinship Care.

Re-designing care services

Promote wellbeing

- \$1.3 million over three years for additional therapeutic treatment services to help children and young people recover from trauma and past experiences of abuse and neglect.
- \$1.2 million over four years to introduce a new volunteer mentoring program to facilitate access to positive activities and provide community support for young people in Residential Care.
- \$2.4 million, in a related 2009-10 State Budget initiative, to expand the Outreach Service. This after hours service seeks out, intervenes and protects young people in out-of-home care vulnerable to street-based sex and drug related exploitation in the Melbourne Central Business District and St Kilda.
- Provide priority access to public housing for families providing Kinship Care to ensure families have the supports they need to stay together.
- Continue to implement the entry to care assessment pilot.

Prepare young people leaving care to make the transition into adult life

- Continue to roll out leaving care reforms introduced as part of the implementation of the new *Children Youth and Families Act 2005*.
- Develop with young people in care, child protection and the sector a *Things that matter* checklist for care leavers. The checklist will ensure that activities of importance to young people form a key part of care planning and young people are well supported in getting involved in these activities.

Improve the education of children in care

- Develop and implement an action plan to support the existing Partnering Agreement between DHS and DEECD and provide a sustained response to the education and training needs of children in care.
- Implement free kindergarten for all three and four year-old children known to child protection.

Develop effective and culturally appropriate responses for Aboriginal children in our care

- Actions under each direction will pay particular attention to the needs of Aboriginal children by tailoring components to Aboriginal children and young people.
- Increase support to train CSOs to improve their cultural competency.
- Continue to implement two Aboriginal specific Therapeutic Residential Care pilots, with the first placements made by September 2009.

A child focused system and processes

- Review the service planning and funding framework for out-of-home care services. The purpose of this review is to examine options for establishing tailored support arrangements for children and young people, with a particular focus on highly complex teenage clients.
- \$10 million to upgrade Residential Care units, drawing on building design principles which emphasise home-like environments and enhance therapeutic care.
- Establish a system to monitor the outcomes of children and young people in care to support evidence-based policy.

Delivering better outcomes

Phase 2: Proposals for further development

- Build on the evaluation of these pilots of family-based interventions by exploring a state wide rollout.
 - Examine other models that address family strengthening, including placement prevention, mediation and family reunification programs and investigate further the use of access to insure it is a constructive tool in family reunification.
 - Develop a broader range of options within out-of-home care in order to maximise the potential for placing sibling groups together where this is deemed to be appropriate and in their best interests.
 - Evaluate therapeutic Residential Care models to inform the government's decisions about the wider use and benefits of a therapeutic approach in Residential Care.
 - Investigate the feasibility of reconfiguring Residential Care to provide greater placement choice and enable young people to be better matched to placements, including examination of staffing models, two bed units, single sex units and specialist placements for children and young people with sexualised behaviours.
 - Build on *Fostering a Brighter Future* by exploring the development of further strategies to recruit and retain more foster carers with the community services sector.
- Work towards ensuring that all children and young people in out-of-home care have a care plan, case worker and integrated support team. These integrated care teams will be built around the needs of the child and take into account the bonds that often exist between children, young people and their caregivers.
 - Improve access for children and young people in care and their carers to government services and enhance opportunities for children to participate in leisure activities.
 - Examine proposals to expand the therapeutic treatment in out-of-home care services, for example, targeted support to respond better to children and young people with complex needs in home-based care.
- Work with the Australian Government through the National Child Protection Framework to improve access and services to those young people leaving care.
- Set targets for the improvement of educational outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care over the next five years.
 - Investigate a range of innovative educational approaches for children and young people in out-of-home care , for example tutoring support and scholarships to encourage educational completion at secondary and tertiary levels.
 - Respond to the evaluation of Therapeutic Residential Care models as it relates to placement of Aboriginal young people in Residential Care.
- Develop and implement proposed models of flexible funding options for tailored support arrangements to better respond to young people in out-of-home care with complex needs.
 - Develop appropriate structures and mechanisms through which the voice and views of children and young people are meaningfully and regularly incorporated into the reform program.
 - Develop a strategic research agenda to support the reform of out-of home care.
 - Use the outcomes from the Child Protection Operating Model Demonstration Project to improve care planning and decision-making processes.

Next steps

The care and protection of children and young people is a community issue that requires a community solution.

Our Coalition for Change with CSOs offers the best prospects for moving forward with out-of-home care reform in an effective and sustained way. We know from the success of *Every Child Every Chance* reforms just how well the Coalition for Change can work. The agreement between the government and the sector to implement ChildFIRST was central to reducing substantiated cases of child abuse and the number of new children entering care and demonstrates what can be achieved when we work together for the wellbeing of vulnerable children, young people and their families.

Children and young people in care and others entering or leaving care need us to bring that same collaborative spirit to the crucial task of reforming Victoria's out-of-home care system.

We are now embarking on a journey of reform. The vision is clear, but while some actions will be implemented immediately, there still remain many steps which will require further consideration, discussion, collaboration and planning. Challenges such as the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in care and demand growth, as a result of the increasingly complex needs of children and the longer average length of stay in the system, will not be resolved immediately. The partnership between government, service providers and the community will play a pivotal role in achieving a future where children in care are given the life skills and support to achieve their full potential.

In progressing the new reform agenda, the Victorian Government will continue its engagement with major stakeholders, including children and young people in care. In the immediate future, there will be extensive dialogue through Ministerial roundtables, as well as further forums to ensure communication and consultation is ongoing with all our stakeholders.

This work will contribute to a five year strategic agenda which will chart a course for government and the sector, outlining new solutions to achieve better outcomes for children and young people in care.



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