



Centre for Excellence
in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

State Budget Submission 2017/18

About the Centre

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare is the peak body representing organisations that work with children and families experiencing vulnerability in Victoria. Its members include a wide range of children and family services, local government and other sector organisations in health and education. We provide advocacy, research, policy analysis and training to member organisations. We have a strong focus on working in partnership with organisations, including cross-sectoral collaborations. The Centre has been working closely with the Department of Health and Human Services to implement key reforms, including in out-of-home care, building workforce capability and implementing evidence-informed practice.





Centre for Excellence
in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

State Budget Submission 2017/18

Acknowledgment

We respectfully acknowledge that we work on the traditional land of the Kulin Nation and we acknowledge the Wurundjeri people who are the traditional custodians of this land. We pay respects to community members and elders past and present.



Introduction

Every child deserves to grow up safe, happy, healthy, well-educated and with every opportunity to build a decent life.

But that's not always the reality, with a growing number of children and young people in our community denied these most basic rights.

Many live in families struggling under the weight of disadvantage and poverty – caused and compounded by a range of factors including unemployment or underemployment, mental illness, poor health, disability, substance abuse, poor housing, a lack of educational opportunity and family violence – or more likely a combination of these.

For some families, disadvantage has been entrenched over many generations.

Victoria's rapidly growing population and changes in the labour market, particularly the manufacturing sector, have put further pressure on families surviving on low incomes.

As our community grows, not only in size, but in complexity and diversity, so do the social challenges confronting us.

The Andrews Government should be congratulated for their willingness to acknowledge that, for many families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, we can do better. That our current network of services doesn't always respond to the complex needs of families or the growing and changing communities throughout Victoria. That we need to shift focus and investment away from crisis response and towards measures that build the strength and capability of families and that keep kids safe and able to thrive.

On the back of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, the Government has outlined an ambitious but much-needed reform path seeking to overhaul Victoria's network of social services to better meet the needs of our community – including child protection and family services.

It is a welcome approach because it recognises that while family violence is one of the biggest social issues confronting our community, it doesn't happen in isolation and thus can't be tackled in isolation.

Rather, we need to step back and address, more systematically and much earlier, the broader issues that create a breeding ground for family violence or lead to abuse and neglect of children and young people.

That means building the capability of families to care for their children and providing clear and accessible pathways to well-resourced community services that play a crucial role in helping people overcome challenges in their lives, such as universal services, family services, mental health supports, alcohol and other drug services.

It means ensuring consistent and quality care for children and young people unable to live with their parents, giving them every opportunity to thrive.

It also means recognising and embracing families, children, mothers, and fathers as experts in the solutions to the complex problems they face.

The Family Violence 10 Year Plan must recognise the critical role of family services in working with families experiencing family violence, delivering men's behaviour change programs, and keeping children safe and able to thrive.

The Family Violence 10 Year Plan and the government's blueprint for improving our child protection systems – its *Roadmap for Reform* – present an opportunity to build stronger families and more connected, caring communities where people can access the help they need, when they need it, without fear or stigma.

But it is crucial that focus and investment be maintained over the long term. There is no quick fix.

Our Budget submission, presented on behalf of the child, youth and family services sector, is structured according to the *Roadmap for Reform*, which outlines the child and family services sector's role in responding to the Royal Commission's recommendations. We focus on a number of critical elements that will need to be implemented and harnessed if we are to do a better job of protecting and upholding the rights of every child in our community.

The core elements of our submission are as follows:

- » Services must be person-centred, well-connected and tailored to meet the diverse needs of all families and communities
- » Support for families, children and young people must come early enough to make a difference
- » All efforts must be grounded in innovative, evidence-based practice.

When it comes to better supporting families and communities, one size doesn't fit all.

Service delivery solutions must be **locally based and tailored, building on existing services and matching the needs of the communities and families they seek to serve**. These services need to **work closely together** to deliver seamless and timely referral pathways for children and families.

Investing in **prevention and early intervention is key**. That includes identifying and addressing the causes, rather than the symptoms, of disadvantage, vulnerability and violence, particularly as they affect children and young people, so we can keep families strong and together in the first place and better ensure children and young people are able to navigate out of entrenched disadvantage.

For example, we know that **readily accessible, quality early education** plays a crucial role in a child's life outcomes, particularly when families are facing vulnerability and disadvantage.

As such, **universal services, including maternal and child health services and the early education sector, will be critical allies in our efforts to keep kids safer at home** and better set up for success later in life.

The **impact of the reform process and systems changes on those we are seeking to serve must be carefully considered at all stages**, particularly those experiencing the greatest vulnerability and disadvantage – including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, families for whom English is a second language, people with disabilities and members of the LGBTIQ community.

That means **closely involving families and communities** throughout the reform process.

With Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children over-represented in the child protection system, **supporting and empowering Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)** will also be crucial to reform efforts.

This will require **building and facilitating strong, productive partnerships between mainstream Community Service Organisations (CSOs) and ACCOs** working together to ensure more Aboriginal children remain within their community and their culture.

Investment must be driven by the **evidence of what works and strong measures of success** – so we progress with certainty that our efforts are in the best interests of children, young people and families.

And **there must be accountability at every stage of the process**, with entities like the Auditor-General and the Commissioner for Children and Young People given a clear line of sight over reform efforts to ensure the best interests of children and young people are upheld at every step.

The Family Violence 10 Year Plan and the *Roadmap for Reform* offer a way forward, but the real work is ahead. It is crucial that the government, through this and future budgets, ensures that its departments, the child, youth and family services sector, allied sectors and the communities we serve have the resources and tools we need to bring about real and lasting change for the benefit of Victoria's most vulnerable children and young people.

Summary of Recommendations

Our recommendations address four key areas:

- The *Roadmap for Reform* directions
- The strengths and needs of Aboriginal children, families and organisations
- Workforce capability and
- Evidence-informed practice.

Within each of the four key areas, we call on the Government to invest in the following:

i. Funding the Roadmap for Reform:

Direction 1: Building supportive and culturally strong communities and improving access to universal services

1. Increase investment in prevention and early intervention services, from conception to school age, in programs and strategies that have proven to be effective, to at least the same levels as tertiary services. In particular, adequately resource:
 - a. early parenting centres to be able to provide early intervention for families needing intensive support and respite to care for their children and reduce the potential for and incidence of family violence
 - b. culturally accessible programs that have engaged CALD and Aboriginal families and have been proven to reduce the likelihood of children needing to be taken into care
 - c. parenting programs and supported playgroups that have been proven to be effective in supporting and building the capabilities of the most complex families
 - d. ACCOs to be able to deliver culturally sensitive and appropriate universal services and early intervention to Aboriginal families with children aged 0 to 6 years.
2. Strengthen the capacity and capability of universal services, through evidence-based training, cross-sectoral collaboration agreements, and mentoring programs, to be able to identify and respond effectively to families experiencing vulnerability.

Direction 2: Supporting children, young people and families in need with integrated wraparound supports and targeted early interventions

3. Collect and analyse government data to:
 - a. map and fund future Child Protection and Integrated Family Services growth and demand
 - b. map and fund demand in specialist services, including drug and alcohol treatment, mental health support services, and family violence services
 - c. give priority to families in greatest need or whose children may be taken into state care.
4. Embed early intervention and specialist services for children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage at the core of the Support and Safety Hubs

5. Fund 150 family-inclusive Targeted Care Packages specifically for placement prevention and reunification, including funding to cover administration costs and cross system collaboration between child and family services, specialist services and child protection services.

Direction 3: Strengthening home-based care and improving outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care

6. Fund the extension of state care to at least 21 years of age giving young people in care the option to be supported beyond the age of 18 years to continue their education, find stable and secure accommodation, maintain regular health checks and live in safe surroundings
7. Identify and invest in appropriate reimbursement levels for foster and kinship carers in line with the national average, as well as making therapeutic support available to all carers to assist them with the children and young people in their care
8. Make reimbursements, training and ongoing support available to informal kinship carers. This should include funding for awareness raising activities, so kinship carers know what supports are available
9. Release the KPMG review of Victoria's Kinship Care Services together with clear actions against each of the recommendations so that progress can be tracked
10. Invest in the continuation of the *Fostering Connections* project until 2020 to enable this important attraction and recruitment program to be embedded over the longer term and properly evaluated
11. As a matter of urgency, provide training for principals and teachers in trauma-informed practice and their obligations under the Out-of-Home Care Commitment to minimise the risk of vulnerable children disengaging from learning.

ii. Achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and organisations:

12. Commit to and appropriately resource implementation of the recommendations of the *Systemic Inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care*.
13. Provide the necessary resourcing and support to ACCOs to assist them to expand intensive family services (particularly placement prevention

and reunification) to support families to look after their children and so reduce the number of Aboriginal children entering out-of-home care

14. Fund evaluation of family group conferencing models and invest in those models that have proved effective in preventing Aboriginal children from entering care
15. Increase brokerage funding for Aboriginal cultural plans to ensure the cultural safety of Aboriginal children
16. Appropriately fund Aboriginal organisations so they can successfully case manage Aboriginal children and families as part of the CSO to ACCO transition initiative.

iii. Building workforce capability:

17. Develop a coordinated workforce strategy that includes mandatory cultural awareness and safety training for all government services, non-Aboriginal community service organisations and carers to improve cultural competency and proficiency.
18. Provide funding incentives to existing workers to enable them to develop requisite knowledge and skills and boost the number of new graduates who are appropriately skilled.

iv. Implementing evidence-informed practice:

19. Set aside 10 per cent of the budget allocated for the Learning System to support the development of tools and resources to assist service providers to strengthen the foundations for evidence-informed practice
20. Incorporate requirements for implementing evidence-informed practice into service agreements to encourage good practice and new initiatives.

i. Funding the Roadmap for Reform

Direction 1: Building supportive and culturally strong communities and improving access to universal services

Invest in the early years to set children up for success

The *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* highlights the importance of the early years in shaping the rest of a child's life. The period from birth to eight years is when rapid brain development occurs and when engagement with others profoundly shapes identity, learning, behaviour, confidence and the capacity for lifelong learning. At this point in a child's life, the quality of the relationship they have with their primary care giver is paramount to their ongoing wellbeing.¹

Children must be given the best start to life. This means making sure that their social, emotional and learning needs are being met, that they are in safe and stable housing, and their rights are at the core of any decision making about their best interests.

Early years learning settings are a key point of contact in the community for families who may be struggling, and are well placed to identify families experiencing family violence and support them to overcome the challenges they face.

As such, we strongly recommend that the government invests heavily in the early years of every Victorian child's life, in particular in building the capacity and capability of parents and families to provide a safe, stable, happy home environment.

Improve the capability of universal services to identify and respond to early signs of vulnerability

Universal services across education and health sectors have a vital role to play in making sure all children, particularly those living in challenging family environments, are given the strongest possible foundation for healthy, safe and productive lives.

The 2015 Australian Early Development Census identified that one in five Victorian children is developmentally vulnerable when they start school, which has the potential to set them back throughout their lives.²

The 2016 report on the Department of Education and Training's *The Education State, Early Childhood* consultation found widespread support for strong and accessible universal services to support the development of every child from an early age and provide a non-stigmatising platform for identifying children and families who need extra support.³

Similarly, Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services provide a critical platform from which to identify and respond to vulnerability and disadvantage in the first 1000 days of a child's life and to prevent escalation of any issues in the family.

As with secondary services, universal services are already and increasingly expected to respond to families experiencing a range of complex issues such as family violence, mental illness and substance misuse.

However, they are not adequately resourced and many workers in the sector are not sufficiently trained to respond to high needs families, which can be exacerbated in regional areas. Enhanced specialist nurses who take on this role are similarly overloaded by demand.

Consistent with the findings of the Royal Commission into Family Violence (recs 3, 139 182, 197, 207), our members have highlighted the need for strong investment to build the capacity and capability of universal services so they are more accessible and responsive to the needs of children and families experiencing vulnerability.

There also needs to be greater collaboration and coordination between universal and secondary service systems to appropriately address the range of issues families are experiencing. This includes improving referral pathways to support services and ensuring a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of relevant services and how they can work together more effectively to support families, particularly in regional areas.

As discussed below, underpinning this is a fundamental need to make sure that specialist services are resourced appropriately to meet demand placed upon them through referrals, particularly during transition points, to prevent children and families from falling through the cracks in the service system.



Roadmap for Reform Direction 1: Call to action

The Centre calls on the Government to:

1. Increase investment in prevention and early intervention services, from conception to school age, in programs and strategies that have proven to be effective, to at least the same levels as tertiary services. In particular, adequately resource:
 - a. early parenting centres to be able to provide early intervention for families needing intensive support and respite to care for their children and reduce the potential for and incidence of family violence
 - b. culturally accessible programs that have successfully engaged CALD and Aboriginal families and have been proven to reduce the likelihood of children needing to be taken into care
 - c. parenting programs and supported playgroups that have been proven to be effective in supporting and building the capabilities of the most complex families
 - d. ACCOs to be able to deliver culturally sensitive and appropriate universal services and early intervention to Aboriginal families with children aged 0 to 6 years.
2. Strengthen the capacity and capability of universal services, through evidence-based training, cross-sectoral collaboration agreements, and mentoring programs, to be able to identify and respond effectively to families experiencing vulnerability.

Roadmap directions continued...

Direction 2: Supporting children, young people and families in need with integrated wraparound supports and targeted early interventions

Map and fund demand in Child Protection and Integrated Family Services

It is crucial that children and families experiencing vulnerability are able to access the right support and services as and when they need them. However, the steadily rising rate and number of child protection reports has had an impact on the capacity of services to intervene early and prevent problems escalating, particularly ChildFIRST.⁴ Child protection reports in the 2016-17 financial year are expected to be over 120,000, an increase of more than 15,000 in the past year.⁵

Demand is expected to increase further on the back of the Royal Commission into Family Violence recommendations and improvements in police reporting on family violence. Recommendation 223 of the Royal Commission recommends the development of *a demand-modeling tool or set of indicators to be used for planning how government as a whole and relevant departments and agencies themselves respond to family violence. Budget processes should take account of the cost of forecast demand.*

It is crucial that this growing demand for child protection services is factored into future planning. The critical role played by Integrated Family Services in providing intensive work in the home of families experiencing family violence, poverty, mental illness and substance misuse, needs to be recognised and funded appropriately.

Similarly, ChildFIRST has played a crucial central intake role at a local level for a range of child and family services despite the demand pressures that have been placed on its service. It will be important to incorporate the many positive aspects and functions of ChildFIRST, including the expertise and experience of ChildFIRST staff, into any new service delivery model.

For the service system to have the ongoing capacity to intervene early and respond to families experiencing vulnerability, it is critical that funding is allocated to at least meet the demand forecast for child and family services each year.

Fund specialist services to meet demand

Consistent with the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence (recs 11, 20, 39, 92, 146, 221), a common theme in discussions with our members is the need to improve the accessibility of specialist services such as family violence services, men's behaviour change programs, Integrated Family Services, and mental health, financial counseling, housing and alcohol and other drug treatment services.

This is particularly important for parents who are at high risk of having their children removed but are unable to access specialist services to address child protection concerns. This has the effect of embedding and perpetuating disadvantage and increases the likelihood of children being placed into care. Given recent legislative changes that impose timelines on permanency planning, this is likely to have lifelong consequences for some families.

Additionally, there are significant long-term social and economic benefits of strategically investing in specialist services, so families are able to get the help they need, when they need it, thus preventing family violence, addressing mental illness or substance misuse, and reducing the likelihood of children being taken into state care.

Similarly, early parenting centres provide a vital early intervention point for vulnerable and disadvantaged families needing additional intensive support to care for their children. The Centre, based on advice from its members, recommends that the government resource these services adequately to meet demand.

As well as the issues outlined above there are likely to be flow-on consequences for the proposed Support and Safety Hubs if demand for specialist services is not adequately met. The risk is that the Hubs themselves will need to hold or take on cases if referral services aren't available. This is likely to be a particular issue in regional areas where there is a significant gap in key support services.

Invest in flexible funding arrangements

Our members have expressed strong support for flexible service delivery models that allow agencies to use funding in innovative ways.

Findings from a recent Centre survey of CSOs in relation to the government's Targeted Care Packages (TCPs) show that although TCPs present a number of challenges and require changes to improve their sustainability, many organisations appreciate the opportunity to individualise services and to be flexible in their service delivery approach and funding arrangements.⁶

Organisations consider the TCPs to be an effective means of enabling children and young people in, or at risk of being in, residential care to achieve better outcomes.

At the recent two-day *Roadmap for Reform* symposium, participants recognised the importance of targeted, individualised family packages as a critical prevention initiative.

The Centre recommends that the government continue to invest in TCPs and other flexible funding options but broaden the scope of these options to focus on activities and strategies to support placement prevention and reunification.

The development of these can be informed by the evaluation of TCPs currently underway. The Centre's survey of CSOs highlighted the need for any future TCP arrangements to include funding to cover administration costs and support cross system collaboration between child and family services, specialist services and child protection services.

We also recommend setting TCP targets for priority groups in the community to make sure they are meeting the greatest need; we understand that only 40 of the 210 TCPs to date have been for Aboriginal children and young people, highlighting the need for targets for priority groups to make sure TCPs are allocated as intended.

Our members have also raised concerns with the competitive model for flexible funding.

Currently, multiple service providers including government agencies, Aboriginal organisations, not-for-profit non-government organisations (NGOs) and

for-profit contractors are all competing for funding in the same space, with little evidence of success.⁷

Aboriginal organisations in Victoria have expressed the need to consider levelling the playing field by creating a non-competitive environment, allowing for greater partnership between agencies to achieve family-centered wraparound funding packages.

They advise that this would create an environment that focuses on organisational strengths and encourages collaboration and resource sharing, rather than one of fear that focuses on organisational vulnerability. This will ultimately lead to better outcomes for vulnerable children and their families.

Roadmap for Reform Direction 2: Call to action

The Centre calls on the Government to:

3. Collect and analyse government data to:
 - a. map and fund future Child Protection and Integrated Family Services growth and demand
 - b. map and fund demand in specialist support services, including drug and alcohol treatment and mental health support services
 - c. give priority to families in greatest need or whose children may be taken into state care
4. Embed early intervention and specialist services for children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage at the core of the Support and Safety Hubs
5. Fund 150 family-inclusive Targeted Care Packages specifically for placement prevention and reunification, including funding to cover administration costs and cross system collaboration between child and family services, specialist services and child protection services.

Roadmap directions continued...

Direction 3: Strengthening home-based care and improving outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care

Extend the entitlement of state care services and support until at least 21 years

Victoria Legal Aid highlights the need for longer-term solutions that ‘more effectively facilitate critical transition points’ for young people, notably at the time when they leave state care to prevent their entry into homelessness and the youth justice system.⁸

Research shows the difficulties young people experience when being forced to leave care with limited support. Having to leave their living situation and find appropriate accommodation while also trying to finish school is a key barrier to continuing on to further study and employment.⁹

Recent research and international examples show that the poor educational, housing and health outcomes experienced by young people who have been in state care can be significantly reduced if the option is provided to remain in care until at least the age of 21 years.¹⁰

The cost-benefit analysis provided in a recent report shows that every dollar invested in the ‘extending care’ program is associated with an expected return of \$1.84 in either savings or increased income,¹¹ predominantly resulting in savings to the state (see Chart 1 & Table 1).

We recommend that the government commits to providing the option to young people to continue to be entitled to critical supports until the age of at least 21. In particular we recommend the inclusion of financial support and a housing and education guarantee.

Based on the evidence, the sector strongly supports extending the leaving age of care to 21 years. The Centre recommends that the government commits to providing the option for young people to continue to be entitled to critical supports until the age of at least 21 years. In particular we recommend the inclusion of financial support and a housing and education guarantee. This extension of care entitlements is a key recommendation of the sector in the out-of-home care space.

CHART 1: Distribution of benefits

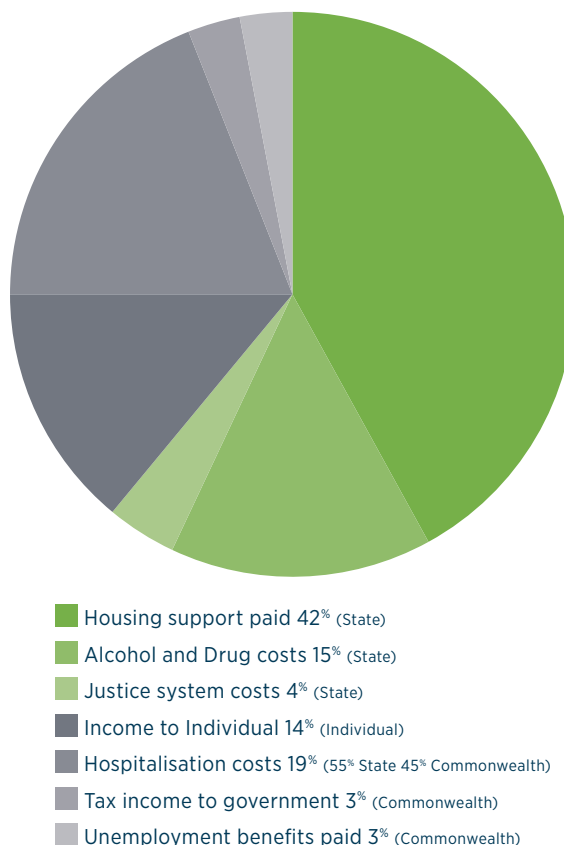


TABLE 1: Present value (\$2015) of costs and benefits over 40 years (uptake rate 24.95%), per 18yo child in OOH in 2015¹²

	Program not offered	Program offered	Difference
Total costs	124	20,139	20,015
Total benefits	56,520	93,381	36,861
Net benefits	56,396	73,242	16,846
Benefit to cost ratio			1.84

Enhance home-based care to ensure better outcomes for children and young people

The Centre recognises the government’s strong commitment to improving home-based foster and kinship care as the preferred option for children and young people who cannot live with their parents. We welcome the recent announcement of additional funding for more training, support resources and financial assistance to foster and kinship carers.

However, there is ongoing concern about the level of financial support, training and resources provided to Victoria's carers, particularly in light of the complex needs of many children in care who require significant and ongoing support to recover from the stress and trauma they have experienced in their lives.

The recently completed review of Kinship Care Services raised a number of issues that must be addressed if kinship care is to be a sustainable and safe model of care for children and young people.

In particular, kinship carers receive less access to services, support and financial reimbursement than foster carers, despite statutory kinship care being the largest component of the state care system in Victoria, having responsibility for 5000-5500 children at any one time.

Survey results from recent research undertaken by the Centre as part of the *Raising Expectations* initiative show that both formal and informal kinship carers are struggling to support the children in their care due to systemic and financial barriers.

The difficulties are particularly acute for informal kinship carers who have little or no financial support, particularly grandparent carers already surviving on a limited income.

The Centre urges that all carers across the state – including foster carers and informal and formal kinship carers – are appropriately reimbursed, in line with the national average and according to the individual needs of each child.

The Centre also recommends increased investment in training, resources and tools to support carers in their role of caring for the most vulnerable children with complex trauma histories.

This should include therapeutic support for each child and should take into account extra-curricular activity to support their emotional wellbeing and social development and any additional educational support required to bring them up to an appropriate academic level for their age.

Further, we call for the public release of the Kinship Care Services review outcomes, together with a detailed plan for implementing improvements and a timeline against which progress can be tracked.

Foster care is the second highest form of care provided to children who are unable to live with their birth families, yet the number of foster carers available has not kept pace with demand.

The Centre and its members also support consideration of professionalising foster care, with appropriate pay and training, in recognition of the significant and increasingly complex work undertaken by Victoria's carers.

Continue the commitment to foster carer attraction and recruitment efforts

The *Fostering Connections* project is funded until January 2017.

Between 21 January 2016 and 31 August 2016, the campaign has seen 1518 new enquiries from prospective foster carers referred to agencies, in addition to enquiries received directly by individual agencies.

There have been over 48,000 visitors to the *Fostering Connections* website during this period – an important resource providing information about becoming a foster carer to the community. The campaign has also been successful in attracting new enquiries from the CALD community (with over 80 CALD groups represented).

The project has also delivered significant benefits in terms of bringing together all foster care agencies under one central brand, as well as establishing a central point for data collection about the foster carer accreditation journey. This level of data has never been previously available and will help to guide future enhancements to the foster carer attraction and recruitment process and to better support foster carers and vulnerable children.

However, sustained results can only be achieved with an ongoing longer term commitment to *Fostering Connections*.

Roadmap directions continued...

Support the educational needs of children in care

Education is a key tool for building resilience, self-reliance, future opportunity, and equity and accessibility for young people, particularly those who have experienced trauma or vulnerability.

The Centre welcomes the government's focus on improving the educational outcomes of all children and young people in Victoria. This commitment is particularly evident in the investment in equity funding, and initiatives including the Lookout Education Centres and the Navigator program pilot, refunding of the School Focused Youth Service and Local Learning and Employment Networks.

We support the expansion of the Lookout and Navigator initiatives pending the recommendations made in the evaluations. However, the success of these initiatives is also reliant on a number of additional factors.

Education needs to be integral to the therapeutic support provided to children and young people in care, not an adjunct. Our members and carers themselves have consistently and strongly raised the importance of developing well-crafted education plans that involve children and schools, providing trauma-informed professional development opportunities to schools, and ongoing intensive academic and learning support, tutoring, and mentoring as required to enable young people who miss schooling to catch up.

Strengthening educational pathways for young people in state care is a critical means of supporting them to achieve independence and brighter futures.

Unfortunately, the risk of being excluded from school is significantly higher for young people who are already facing disadvantage than for their peers, and school exclusion and disengagement from school are common experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care.

A key mechanism for providing a more integrated approach to engaging children in out-of-home care in schooling is the existing Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment. However, feedback from our members indicates a concerning lack of knowledge in schools from principals and staff about the partnering agreement obligations.

Where there is knowledge about the agreement, this appears to be applied inconsistently within and across schools. Feedback from members also indicates not all schools have the capacity to develop and manage Individual Education Plans. There is lack of clarity around the role of the Learning Mentor and how these mentors are being used. It is not clear how many children have a Student Support Group, how often these meet, and how effective these are in monitoring engagement and performance.

The Centre calls on the government to invest adequately in training of school principals and staff to understand the impact of trauma on children's wellbeing and capacity to engage in learning, the purpose and requirements of the partnering agreement, and to monitor compliance with its obligations.

At this critical period of reform in the state care system, the government must not miss the opportunity to invest in a strategic long-term solution for young people in care to maximise their chances of succeeding later in life.

This should include investing in keeping young people engaged in education and employment, working with and supporting carers sufficiently, and providing the opportunity for young people to continue to access the supports and services of state care until at least the age of 21 years.



Roadmap for Reform Direction 3: Call to action

The Centre calls on the Government to:

6. Fund the extension of state care to at least 21 years of age giving young people in care the option to be supported beyond the age of 18 years to continue their education, find stable and secure accommodation, maintain regular health checks and live in safe surroundings
7. Identify and invest in appropriate reimbursement levels for foster and kinship carers in line with the national average, as well as making therapeutic support available to all carers to assist them with the children and young people in their care
8. Make reimbursements, training and ongoing support available to informal kinship carers. This should include funding for awareness raising activities, so kinship carers know what supports are available
9. Release the KPMG review of Victoria's Kinship Care Services together with clear actions against each of the recommendations so that progress can be tracked
10. Invest in the continuation of the *Fostering Connections* project until 2020 to enable this important attraction and recruitment program to be embedded over the longer term and properly evaluated
11. As a matter of urgency, provide training for principals and teachers in trauma-informed practice and their obligations under the Out-of-Home Care Commitment to minimise the risk of children experiencing vulnerability disengaging from learning

ii. Achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people, families and organisations

The *Systemic Inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people*, undertaken by the Commission for Children and Young People, highlights a number of systemic failings that perpetuate inequity and disadvantage for Aboriginal communities.

As a matter of priority, the Centre urges the government to invest in the recommendations of the Inquiry report, and to provide the resources and support needed to enable case management of Aboriginal children and decision making about their lives to be transferred to ACCOs.

Where appropriate, partnerships between ACCOs and non-Aboriginal CSOs should be supported and strengthened to share responsibility for the care of children.

Partnership approaches to the delivery of care to Aboriginal Victorians must ensure equity between partners. Where ACCOs are partnered with mainstream organisations to deliver state-funded services, ACCOs should play a central role as the experts in culturally appropriate and safe care.

New Victorian legislative requirements for Cultural Support Planning have resulted in a significant increase in the number of cultural plans needed. Whilst the Centre acknowledges the significant investment in supporting a new model, there needs to be an increase in brokerage funding for Aboriginal cultural plans.

There is widespread recognition that Aboriginal children in the care system who are connected to their family, community and culture have better life outcomes than those who are not.

Strengthen support for Aboriginal families in the early years

A consistent theme in our consultations with members and with our Aboriginal stakeholders is the need to strengthen Aboriginal families' capacity and capability to care for their children by providing resources for early years intervention and prevention work that caters for Aboriginal families with children aged 0-6 years.

Ultimately this early intervention focus is critical to address the drivers of Aboriginal children and young people entering out-of-home care, including entrenched disadvantage, family violence, substance misuse and mental illness. There also needs to be a focus on placement prevention and reunification to reduce the number and over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the out-of-home care and youth justice systems.

Services must be supported and resourced to cater to the needs of Aboriginal families with children in their first 1000 days experiencing or at risk of experiencing trauma and vulnerability.

A number of ACCOs provide effective early learning services that engage Aboriginal families and are culturally safe and strong. They provide one-on-one intensive, strengths-based, early intervention support to Aboriginal parents and carers to build their capacity to cater to their children's health, education, cultural and safety needs.

In particular, evidence provided by our members suggests children in culturally specific Aboriginal early learning environments are able to thrive due to the individual and trauma-informed attention they receive.¹³ Maintaining a strong cultural identity is vital for building resilience in child development, and serves as a protective factor against risk. Identity is a key component of the relationship between culture and child-development.¹⁴

Aboriginal families who are able to access culturally safe early learning services are also better able to support their children to thrive mentally and physically and succeed in school.

Invest in Aboriginal Family-Led Decision-Making

Research shows that family group conferences can be empowering for families, can mobilise greater informal and formal support, and can lead to increased safety for children and family members where family violence is present.¹⁵ The Centre calls on the government to invest in the development and implementation of family group conferencing models to prevent Aboriginal children from entering care.



Aboriginal children, young people, families and organisations: Call to action

The Centre calls on the Government to:

12. Commit to and appropriately resource implementation of the recommendations of the *Systemic Inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care*
13. Provide the necessary resourcing and support to ACCOs to assist them to expand intensive family services (particularly placement prevention and reunification) to support families to look after their children and so reduce the number of Aboriginal children entering out-of-home care
14. Fund evaluation of family group conferencing models and invest in those models that have proved effective in preventing Aboriginal children from entering care
15. Increase brokerage funding for Aboriginal cultural plans to ensure the cultural safety of Aboriginal children
16. Appropriately fund Aboriginal organisations so they can successfully case manage Aboriginal children and families as part of the CSO to ACCO transition initiative.

iii. Building workforce capability

Invest in the child and family services workforce

The Centre supports efforts by the government to build the capability of all staff working with children and families experiencing vulnerability. The child and family services sector requires investment in its workforce capability if it is to keep pace with the changing legislative and policy environment. The child and family services workforce needs to be supported to build its expertise and resilience, manage experiences of vicarious trauma, and develop transitional and transferable skills.

The government's ambitious reform agenda will require significantly more qualified staff than currently exist if the goals of the *Roadmap for Reform* and Royal Commission into Family Violence recommendations are to be realised. Victoria's current supply of newly qualified staff is not adequate to meet the expected demand.

In addition to 'incentivising' and supporting the existing workforce to develop the necessary knowledge and skills, the government needs to boost the supply of appropriately trained new graduates.

This means identifying the barriers that prevent current workers from becoming more qualified and providing funding incentives to address these. It also means that the Department of Health and Human Services will need to work more closely with the Department of Education and Training to make sure new graduates are fully equipped with the necessary skills.

Provide cultural awareness and safety training

In addition, we recommend the development of a coordinated workforce strategy that includes mandatory cultural awareness and safety training for all government services and non-Aboriginal CSOs to improve their cultural competency and proficiency.

A comprehensive Cultural Safety Strategy will achieve both short and long term improvements in cultural awareness and cultural safety for Aboriginal health and wellbeing across Victoria.

This aligns with a key recommendation of the Commission for Children and Young People's *Systemic Inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care*.



Workforce capability: Call to action

The Centre calls on the Government to:

17. Develop a coordinated workforce strategy that includes mandatory cultural awareness and safety training for all government services, non-Aboriginal community service organisations and carers to improve cultural competency and proficiency
18. Provide funding incentives to existing staff to enable them to develop requisite knowledge and skills and boost the number of new graduates who are appropriately skilled.

iv. Implementing evidence-informed practice

The development of a sector Learning System is a key enabler of the reform directions reflected in the *Roadmap for Reform*. This initiative prioritises the strengthening of evidence-informed practice and demonstrable practice outcomes.

Although this has strong support in the child, youth and family sector, it needs to be funded for this to occur.

Ten percent of the budget allocated to the learning system should be set aside to facilitate the development of tools and resources to support service providers to build their capability to implement evidence-informed practice.

It is also critical that research and evaluation funding is incorporated into service agreements and provided to organisations to review existing good practice and encourage new initiatives.

Evidence-informed practice: Call to action

The Centre calls on the Government to:

19. Set aside 10 percent of the budget allocated for the Learning System to support the development of tools and resources to support service providers to strengthen the foundations for evidence-informed practice
20. Incorporate requirements for implementing evidence-informed practice into service agreements to encourage good practice and new initiatives.

References

- 1 COAG (2009) *Investing in the early years: A national early childhood strategy*, p8.
- 2 Australian Early Development Census. 2016. *2015 AECD Report*. <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedc-national-report>
- 3 Capire Consulting Group. 2016. *Stakeholder and community engagement key findings report: The Education State, Early Childhood*, DET, p4.
- 4 Victorian Auditor General's Office. 2015. *Early intervention services for vulnerable children and families*. VAGO.
- 5 Victorian Budget 2016/17 Budget Paper No.3 Service Delivery, p78 and p82.
- 6 See the Centre's paper on Targeted Care Packages [http://www.cfecfw.asn.au/sites/default/files/Targeted Care Packages Paper.pdf](http://www.cfecfw.asn.au/sites/default/files/Targeted%20Care%20Packages%20Paper.pdf)
- 7 Hudson, S. 2016. *Mapping the Indigenous program and funding maze*. The Centre for Independent Studies. Research Report 18. <https://www.cis.org.au/app/uploads/2016/09/rr18.pdf?>
- 8 Fatouros, H. 2016. *Is Our Youth Justice System Really Broken?* Victoria Legal Aid. Castan Centre for Human Rights Law Conference on 22 July.
- 9 Harvey, A., McNamara, P., Andrewartha, L. & Luckman, M. 2015. *Out of care, into university: Raising higher education access and achievement of care leavers*. La Trobe University.
- 10 Anglicare Victoria, 2016. *Raising Our Children: Guiding young Victorians in care into adulthood*. Produced by Deloitte Access Economics for Anglicare Victoria. http://thehomestretch.org.au/site/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Raising-Our-Children_Guiding-Young-Victorians-in-Care-into-Adulthood.pdf
- 11 Anglicare Victoria, p38.
- 12 Anglicare Victoria, p29.
- 13 For example, at the September 2016 Aboriginal Children's Forum, the Mallee District Aboriginal Co-operative (MDAS) shared the findings of a recent evaluation that showed how MDAS is supporting Aboriginal parents to give the best possible start to their children's development and to keep children with their families.
- 14 Priest, N. et al. 2012. *Aboriginal perspectives of child health and wellbeing in an urban setting: Developing a conceptual framework*. Health Sociology Review, 21(2), p180-195.
- 15 Harris, N. 2008. *Family group conferencing in Australia 15 years on*. Australian Institute of Family Studies. <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/family-group-conferencing-australia-15-years#family>



Centre for Excellence
in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

Centre for Excellence in
Child and Family Welfare

Level 5, 50 Market Street
Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia

Telephone: (03) 9614 1577
Facsimile: (03) 9614 1774

Email: admin@cfecfw.asn.au
Find us on Twitter @CFEFCFW
and Facebook /CentreForExcellence
InChildAndFamilyWelfare

www.cfecfw.asn.au

ABN: 24 629 376 672 RTO: 3696