

Victorian State Budget 2021-22 Submission

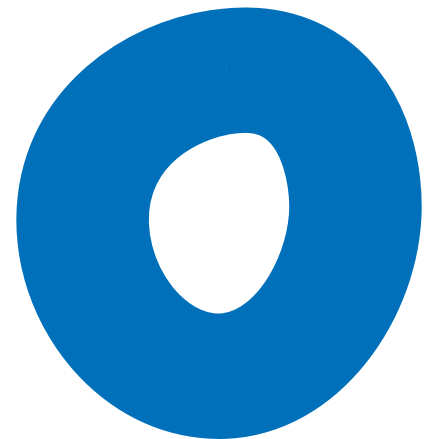
October 2020

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria representing more than 150 community service organisations, students and individuals. The Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and healthy lives.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the past, present, and emerging traditional custodians and Elders of this country on which we work. The Centre also acknowledges the injustices and trauma suffered as a result of European settlement, the Stolen Generations, and other policies such as the forced removal of children from their families, communities, culture and land. We respect the resilience of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the face of this trauma and respect their right to, and aspiration for, self-determination and empowerment.



Victorian State Budget Submission

The Rights of Victorian Children

Successful communities invest in their children and protect their rights.¹ These communities ensure their children grow up safe and healthy, with affordable housing and equitable social welfare policies that provide adequate levels of support.

The foundation for children's rights is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention), which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children.² The Convention, the Council of Australian Governments' National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020, the Victorian *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* and policy for children and families Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families; Safe Children (the Roadmap), all recognise the right of children to be safe, supported, and receive the services they need to succeed in life. They also recognise a child's right to be connected to family, community and culture and for their parents to be supported in their primary responsibility of raising children. To realise these rights, we need to build strength and invest in the capacity in our families and communities, and in the child and family service sector.

Our Collective Responsibility for Victoria's Children

The Convention is a legal document that commits Australia to fulfil the rights of all children. This means:

- Providing children and their families with timely and quality interventions that promote child safety and wellbeing at the earliest opportunity;
- Addressing the risk factors for child abuse and neglect;
- Providing timely and quality support services to children that have been abused or neglected;
- Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to thrive in their families and communities;
- Supporting children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to thrive in their families and communities;
- Supporting children who have witnessed or been victims of crime to heal and feel safe;
- Preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation and providing timely and quality services to survivors.

Victoria's Policy Framework and Achievements

In April 2016, the Victorian Government launched the Roadmap, a policy articulating the case for change in the child and family services system. The Roadmap outlined three reform directions:

1. Building supportive and culturally strong communities and improving access to universal services;
2. Supporting children, young people and families in need with integrated wraparound supports and targeted early interventions;

¹ Child refers to a person between 0 and 18 years of age
² Australia ratified the Convention in 1990

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

Since the Roadmap's launch, some of the achievements of the Victorian Government and the child and family services system include:

- Promoted self-determination led by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations through initiatives and commitments such as Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement and Beyond Good Intentions;
- Introduced LOOKOUT centres to boost the capacity of schools, carers, child protection and out-of-home care services to improve the educational outcomes for children living in out-of-home care;
- Introduced a new model of kinship care supporting children and their carers;
- Built a learning system to be more effective in monitoring and improving outcomes and enabling services to continually re-evaluate, refine and improve;
- Introduced a Community Services Quality Governance Framework to guide the delivery of a safe, effective, connected and person-centred community services;
- Successfully piloted evidence informed, based and promising practice programs;
- Developed a Client voice framework for community services to listen and act on client voices to build empowerment and capability.

Victoria's Recovery from COVID-19

Despite Victoria's progress, and with the recovery from COVID-19 only at its beginning, Victoria's children face an uncertain future. Structural inequality means that children and families facing adversity often do not receive early and effective interventions and their lifelong outcomes and contributions are constrained through no fault of their own.

Prior to, and now compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, too many children live in poverty and too many children are not receiving interventions despite known risks to their safety and wellbeing. The potential of children with developmental delays and disabilities is often neglected, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to experience significant inequalities in health, education, justice and child protection outcomes.

The significant growth in reports to child protection by Victorians who are concerned about the wellbeing and safety of children is emblematic of this uncertain future. One in four children is reported to child protection before their 17th birthday, which means a Victorian child is more likely to be reported to child protection than they are to have asthma.

Family services provides effective interventions to families where children have been reported to child protection or are at risk of being reported. However, in Victoria investment in family services has been significantly outstripped by demand and with the impact of COVID-19 this demand is great than ever. Every child and family reported to child protection that does not receive support or an intervention is a missed opportunity. It also means more children are being reported, more often, to child protection as families reach crisis and are highly vulnerable, traumatised and difficult to engage.

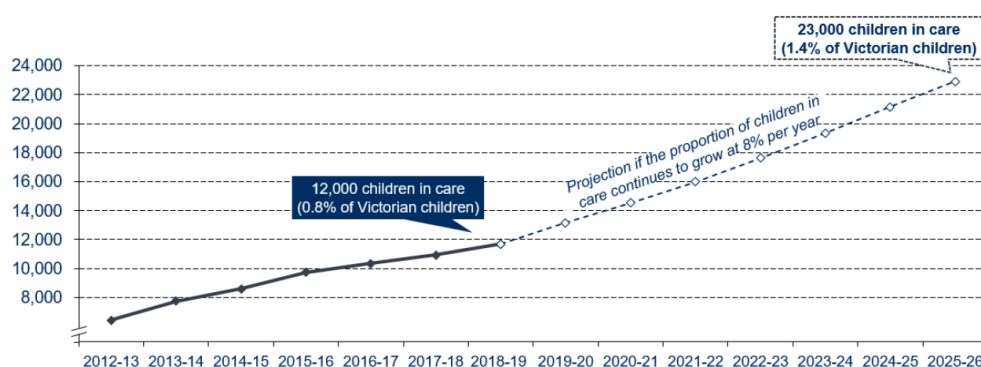
The Victorian Government is commended for increasing the child protection workforce by 43 per cent in the last four years. However, three quarters of all investment in the child and family services sector is directed to the statutory end.

Without significant and sustained investment in effective early intervention services that build family capacity, children will continue to be reported to child protection many times, over many years and won't receive support to address the identified vulnerabilities and risks affecting their safety, wellbeing and development.

The significant need for investment is now urgent with the impact of COVID-19, which has caused over 1 million Australians to lose their jobs with women and young people hit the hardest, and levels of anxiety and depression rising to four times higher than those typically seen in working age Australians.

The Impact of Doing Nothing

Without investment in effective early intervention services that address the drivers of demand for statutory services, by 2026 there could be 23,000 Victorian children in out-of-home care (see graph below). More significantly, these children will experience some of the highest levels of vulnerability in the Victorian community, as an out-of-home care experience is likely to have lifelong impacts, interrupting their connections to family, community, culture and education – all of which are vital to their development. These children are more likely to experience homelessness and unemployment, and are significantly less likely to finish year 12 and pursue higher education, and their children are more likely to be known to child protection.



The Economic Cost of Doing Nothing

The economic case for investment in children’s health, wellbeing and education is irrefutable. By failing to intervene early, address systemic causes and prevent or reduce the severity of difficulties children experience, the Australian taxpayer is spending an estimated \$15.2 billion every year in tertiary services.³

The case for additional and long-term investment in targeted early intervention and intensive family preservation programs to prevent children entering out-of-home care is clear. Investing approximately \$180 million every year over a 10-year period will deliver a cumulative net saving of \$1.8 billion to the child protection and out-of-home care systems in Victoria.⁴ **Put simply, intervening early costs less than attempts at remedial intervention.** More importantly, this investment would prevent approximately 1,460 Victorian children entering out-of-home care over ten years.

The Centre’s Submission to the Victorian Government

Safeguarding the health and wellbeing of children requires concerted action and investment, particularly for those children experiencing vulnerability and hardship. Never has this been needed more as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our vision is that all Victorian children are safe and able to thrive. The best way to protect children is to prevent child abuse and neglect occurring in the first place. To achieve this, we need a shared, long-term commitment. The Centre supports the Commission for Children and Young People’s recommendation for a new investment approach in line with the Roadmap that

³ Teager, W, Fox, S & Stafford, N 2019, How Australia can invest in children and return more: A new look at the \$15b cost of late action, CoLab, Perth.

⁴ Social Ventures Australia, August 2020.

enables the development, resourcing and implementation of an integrated, whole-of-system investment model and strategy for the child and family system. This investment strategy should focus on maintaining safe and quality services in line with demand while also investing to reduce the number of children entering out-of-home care.⁵

Our submission to the Victorian Government is for a commitment to new and sustained investment to:

- Significantly reduce the incidences of abuse and neglect;
- Meaningfully address the concerns that result in children being reported to child protection, by ensuring all children reported to child protection receives a planned response;
- Reduce entries (and re-entries) into out-of-home care;
- Secure a better future for children who cannot live safely at home and support them to transition from out-of-home care to independent adulthood (this includes supporting Home Stretch and Better Futures for every child in out-of-home care and extending it to children on a permanent care order);
- Meet the needs and uphold the rights of Victorian children experiencing vulnerability and hardship.

The community service organisations at the front line responding to the needs of Victorian children and families are experiencing unprecedented levels of challenges and demand, and this demand has significantly increased with the COVID-19 pandemic. These organisations have a commitment to doing the best for each and every child and are focused on preventing a cycle of long-term disadvantage forming. The Centre is looking to the Victorian Government to support the essential service provision and workforces in community service organisations.

In the November 2020 and May 2021 state budgets, the Centre is calling on the Victorian Government to invest in:

- a. New investment in targeted early intervention and intensive family preservation programs. This investment in effective early intervention would:
 - Support families to address vulnerabilities and risks that affect a child's safety, wellbeing and development;
 - Prevent children being reported or re-reported to child protection and entering out-of-home care; and
 - Reduce children engaging in the youth justice system. This investment would be targeted at children that are most at risk of poor outcomes over their life course and to address intergenerational impacts of vulnerability.
- b. Investment in the child and family services system that meets demand, particularly through the recovery from COVID-19 and provides accompanying increased brokerage to meet their material needs and enable:
 - Early and effective interventions with families to address issues impacting child safety and wellbeing, and to enable family services to make meaningful changes that promote the safety and wellbeing of their children;
 - Safe and stable placements for children in out-of-home care, so no Victorian child removed from their families for their protection is being placed in a hotel or motel, or experiencing multiple placements;
 - Ensure that children heal and thrive and do not experience further harm or disadvantage from an out-of-home care placement.
 - Provide funding to double the number of Targeted Care Packages to support children in out-of-home care transition to home based care or back to their family.

5 Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) 2019, In our own words: Systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system, CCYP, Melbourne

- Fully fund and implement the *Residential Care Action Plan* to achieve a new vision for residential care which is purposeful and provides the intensity and quality of care needed to help children and young people recover from the effects of trauma.
- c. Recurrent funding for short term (lapsing) funding for:
- Programs in an ongoing area of need and/or have been rolled over previously;
 - Capacity funding, or funding that has been provided for demand that is ongoing;
 - Renewal or continuation of a successful trial/pilot program, particularly where an evaluation of that program has found it to be effective.

New short-term funding for future trial/pilot programs should be given to enable delivery and evaluation of the program effectively. Providing short-term funding on a longer basis (3-4 years) will also assist in addressing workforce issues surrounding turnover and job security.

- d. Further short-term funding (in addition to the \$77.5m provided in April 2020) to alleviate the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly given the extension and severity of the Victorian lock-down measures. This will help ensure client access to services, delivery standards, and appropriate staffing levels can be maintained to meet increasing demand.
- e. Funding a sustainable child and family services sector. This means pricing of state funded child and family services against the actual cost to deliver, and providing a fair indexation and growth funding to meet demand.
- f. Universal transition support to independent adulthood for all care leavers (including those in permanent care) – this means funding transition supports as an entitlement for all care leavers to extend beyond the end of 2020 and be included in the base funding (including for those in permanent care), so young people are healthy, educated, in stable housing and connected to community. This will:
- Halve the homeless rate of this cohort (which is currently two thirds of the youth homeless population in Victoria);
 - Double education and employment engagement;
 - Reduce pregnancies between 18 and 21 years of age by 38 per cent, which will have a lifelong impact for these care leavers and their children.
- g. Investment in community paediatricians and universal Pathways to Good Health Clinics for children in out-of-home care and all children known to child protection, to ensure that the rights of all children to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health and access to health care services; the right for children who have been neglected or abused to receive care to promote recovery; and the right for children who have been placed in out-of-home care to have their situation and treatment reviewed regularly.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and their Families

More funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations will enable increased Aboriginal care, guardianship and management of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The Centre is committed, through Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC), Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement and its participation in the Aboriginal Children's Forum, to the principles of self-determination and self-management. The Centre supports more funding and a stronger role for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in the design and delivery of local services and supports that are culturally responsive and safe.

Treating Families Fairly

The work of our sector is more difficult when social security policies fail to uphold families' right to an adequate standard of living, instead trapping them in poverty and compromising the wellbeing and development of children. State-funded child and family services are being diverted from their core purpose towards meeting basic material needs of families, in circumstances where those should be met by the social security system. In addition to support provided through child and family services, the state government expends significant resources supporting families to meet their basic needs. The Centre calls on the Victorian Government to advocate through National Cabinet for a permanent and adequate increase to social security payments so that families can meet their basic living expenses.

A Minister for Families

The Centre calls on the Victorian Government to invest in holistic, wraparound supports that sit behind the drivers of demand for child protection such as access to housing, employment opportunities, mental health support, and alcohol and other drug interventions. We also call on the Victorian Government to establish a Minister for Families to ensure the government and community are held accountable for child health, wellbeing and safety.

Put simply, investment in Victoria's children cannot wait.

COVID-19 and Victoria's Children and Families

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted families and communities across Victoria. Children and families who were already facing adversity have been most impacted by the pandemic. These families are struggling, some for the first time, with increased social isolation, poorer mental health, loss of employment and reduced access to social supports. These are known risk factors that impact child wellbeing, and undermine the ability of Victorian families to keep their children safe and at home.

These issues are compounded by access to the safety net of school, childcare and health services having been severely restricted for much of 2020. Children have fallen through the cracks, their needs are not being met, or they are at risk of harm.

It is already clear that the pandemic and the recession it has triggered will profoundly impact the future of Victorian children. We need to invest in COVID-19 recovery that focuses on the needs of children and their families **to make sure that no child is left behind.**

Not-for-profit community service organisations who provide child and family services, on behalf of government, are at the front line, working with children and families to address the impacts of COVID-19, and providing the foundation for social recovery from COVID-19. These organisations, who were already struggling to meet demand, have experienced unprecedented demand for their services due to COVID-19.

We must keep children safe and supported as we recover from COVID-19. This means significantly more investment is needed in the child and family services from a crisis response to a whole-of-family approach that works to support families to keep children safe and to access the services they need. Moreover, the evidence is clear, investment in childhood health, education and development has benefits that compound throughout the lifetime and have the potential to break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage.

Victoria's Child, Parent and Carer Voices

The voices of children and their parents and carers are powerful for promoting meaningful

participation and enabling better decision-making. The Convention stipulates children have a right to be involved in decisions and actions that affect them, to be able to express their views and to have these views duly recognised by adults. Listening to and incorporating the voices of children, parents and carers makes services safer and more effective. The Centre and the child and family services sector are committed to listening and incorporating the voice of those with a lived experience to achieve better outcomes for children and families. The Centre is listening to the voice of those with lived experience through its Youth Ambassador program and Voice of Parents project

Victoria's Young Mums, Bubs and Infants

Investment to enable earlier interventions with families with babies as well as young children will mean more families receive timely and proven interventions when risk factors are first identified and will be supported to improve their parenting skills to keep their children safe. The Murdoch Children's Research Centre has undertaken a comprehensive examination of the evidence that shows the links between abuse and neglect in early childhood and later adverse outcomes. Providing quality support to parents and carers during the first thousand days of a child's life is critical to strengthening protective factors.

Victoria's Schools

Emerging risks and vulnerabilities are often identified in schools and reported to child protection. Families are more likely to be successful in keeping their children safe and well if provided with support before statutory services are engaged. Our schools and family services organisations will achieve the best results if they work together and provide a holistic approach to supporting child wellbeing. To achieve this, the Centre calls for co-location of family services workers in schools with high rates of child protection reports. This will enable earlier and more effective interventions before families escalate into crisis and their children are removed from their care.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

Children with developmental delays and disabilities, who need specialist care and attention, require early screening and interventions to enable them to reach their full potential. These children must have priority access to health services, including to paediatricians. Children who require NDIS must have timely access to assessments and early access to appropriate support plans that meet their needs.

Mental Health Support

Too often, children and young people are missing out on mental health supports. We need 24-hour mental health services for children that are flexible, inclusive and developmentally appropriate, with outreach capacity to meet the unique needs of children and young people where and when support is needed.

Services must also recognise the relationship between trauma and mental health and have an understanding of the out-of-home care system. We must stop children from falling through the gaps of the mental health system when a child or young person has behavioural concerns, and provide coordinated, child-centred and therapeutic supports.

Victoria's Children at Risk of Entry Into Out-of-Home Care

A further 4,500 children could potentially enter the out-of-home care system due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This could mean Victoria reaches 27,500 children in care by 2026, more

than any other state or territory.

Intensive family preservation programs are targeted at children at risk of entering out-of-home care, working with families to tackle the causes of their issues and the challenges they face in a holistic way. Evidence-based and informed interventions that target high need families and are proven to be effective have received only limited funding in Victoria. It is time to fund state-wide roll out of effective evidence-based and informed interventions that we know to be effective in addressing the issues that result in children being at high risk of, or experiencing, out-of-home care and engaging in the youth justice system.

Early Learning for Victoria's Young Children

Support for early child development and school achievement starts before school. Enabling children to attend kinder means the Victorian Department of Education and Training extending the school student transport allowance to kindergarten children, so that their families and carers in regional and rural Victoria receive financial support to enable children to participate in kinder. It also means funding long day care placements that include three-year kinder targeted at families experiencing vulnerability and hardship and home-based carers.

Victoria's Children in Out-of-Home Care

There will always be Victorian children who cannot live safely at home, whether temporarily or permanently.

Children placed in out-of-home care should be safe, stable and supported to thrive. This means funding their needs and having appropriate homes for them. It also means priority access to health and mental health services, supporting in engagement in education and universal extended care (Home Stretch).

This will assist to prevent adverse outcomes and ameliorate the effects of trauma.

Victoria's Home-based Carers (Kinship and Foster Carers)

Home-based carers (kinship and foster carers) are the backbone of the Victorian out-of-home care system and the Victorian community owes them a debt of gratitude. However, in addition to an increasing number of Victorian children entering out-of-home care, there has been an increase in the complexity of the health, behavioural and developmental needs of these children and an overall reduction in the number of foster carers in Victoria.

For Victorian children in out-of-home care to be safe, receive the services they need to succeed in life and thrive we need to support those who care for them. This means:

- Providing home-based carers with priority access to high quality training and support services that empower them to provide the best care for the children in their care;
- Renumerating carers based on the needs of the child they care for, regardless of the placement type (i.e. kinship or foster);
- Developing a state-wide professional foster service to prevent children entering or remaining in residential care.
- It also means understanding the financial impacts of COVID-19 and making a further supplementary \$600 payment to carers.

Given the impact of COVID-19, recruiting and supporting home based carers will be more challenging than ever, so this means we need to fund Fostering Connections on an ongoing basis and provide additional financial support to carers.

Victoria's Children in Residential Care

Children in residential care often present with histories of trauma, challenging behaviours, emotional and social difficulties and complex mental health needs. Traumatic experiences can have a profound impact on a child's psychosocial, cognitive and psychological development.

Our residential care system needs to be redesigned to provide a therapeutic environment and response to all children and a specialist response to children with developmental delay and disability, mental illness or in family groups. These children also need to be actively engaged in education.

Victoria's Residential Care Workforce

Everyone has the right to be safe at work. Occupational violence and aggression are not in the job description of a residential care worker. We need to build knowledge and skills through the development of training and guidance to create a culture where occupational violence and aggression is prevented. This means redesigning the role of a residential care worker to create a safe working environment and making their work more meaningful and impactful. We call on the Government to fund the full implementation of the residential care action plan.

Youth Justice - Victoria's Crossover Kids

A critical time in the development of identity and agency is in adolescence. Young people known to child protection are overrepresented in the youth justice system. Reducing this overrepresentation and criminalisation of young people in residential care requires a coordinated, trauma-informed approach, consistent with the Framework to reduce criminalisation of young people in residential care. We need to increase the funding and commitment to evidence-based programs that keep these children out of youth justice and with their families.

Victoria's Children with Parents in Custody

Children who have a parent in custody are more likely to experience vulnerability, hardship and lifelong disadvantage. These children need to be recognised as an 'equity group' to mandate their priority for education, health and wellbeing support to improve lifelong outcomes.

Victoria's Children Who Are Victims of Crime

Supporting children who are victims of crime, including those who experience crime in their homes requires a specialist response and must be a focus for the Victorian Government.

Adolescents Who Use Violence in the Home

The ongoing work of family violence reforms has highlighted gaps in knowledge and research in this area. The Centre's recent work with professionals from the child and family services and family violence sectors has highlighted the complexities of this issue and the vulnerabilities of these young people. The conceptualisation of adolescents as 'perpetrators' fails to recognise the duality of a young person who is causing harm while simultaneously requiring care and support from parents and caregivers. This highlights the need for earlier intervention, funding and the critical importance of more nuanced and coordinated responses from professionals across all service sectors.

The Centre's Advocacy includes

Home Stretch

Each year about 550 Victorian young people between 16 and 18 years of age transition from out-of-home care. We know that within the first twelve months of their care being terminated 50 per cent will be homeless, a new parent or in custody and a further 35 per cent will have five or more places of abode. Only one per cent enter higher education. In Victoria today, only about 30 per cent of care leavers receive support in their transition to independent adulthood. Transition support should be an entitlement for all care leavers, so they are healthy, educated, in stable housing and connected to community. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, extended care has been provided to all out-of-home care leavers up to 31 December 2020. This needs to be continued with a commitment to permanent funding. We also need to extend transition support to children and young people in permanent care.

Victoria's Age of Criminal Responsibility

In Victoria, the age of criminal responsibility is ten years of age. Such a low age is in breach of human rights standards and puts Victoria out of step with the rest of the world. It is also often the most disadvantaged children who come to the attention of the justice system, and children in out-of-home care, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children with developmental delays or disabilities are significantly overrepresented. It is clear early contact with the justice system increases the likelihood of poor outcomes and re-offending as well as the potential for lifelong involvement with the justice system. Victoria must raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years of age.

Sustainability of the Child and Family Services Sector in Victoria

We must support our child and family services workers and ensure they are appropriately qualified and skilled, and our organisations are well-resourced and effective. We must consider incentives for organisations and workers in regional and rural Victoria where there is high demand from children and families for their services, coupled with recruitment and retention challenges. We need a service sector that is strong, responsive and sustainable to support Victoria's children and families to be empowered to find success in their own lives and achieve outcomes.

The Centre calls on government to fund a sustainable child and family services sector. This means pricing of state funded child and family services against the actual cost to deliver, and providing a fair indexation and growth funding to meet demand.