

# 2022-23 Pre-Budget Submission

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on priorities for the 2022-23 Budget for consideration by the Minister for Housing and Assistant Treasurer.

## Who we are

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. For over 100 years we have advocated 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. We represent over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care.

## The social security system – an investment in children’s wellbeing

The COVID-19 pandemic, and its devastating economic impacts on individuals, workforces and businesses across Australia, has placed our current social security system under the spotlight. People who have never needed social security payments are now being confronted by personal circumstances that have led to renewed discussion about the purpose of our social security system in Australia, who it should serve and how. Despite its adverse impacts, the pandemic has given us an opportunity to implement a different approach to social security, one that values the social safety net as an investment in our nation, especially for our children.

Before the pandemic, an estimated 774,000 children under 15 years of age were living in poverty in Australia, largely due to the low rate of working-age social security payments.<sup>1</sup> Poverty is a structural contributor to vulnerability and rising numbers of children entering care.<sup>2</sup> If governments are serious about addressing child abuse and neglect and improving child wellbeing, then poverty as a key driver of disadvantage and vulnerability must be addressed.

Poverty also limits the capacity of services to meet the needs of many families. Our members consistently report how hard it is to engage families in parenting supports when the family is struggling to feed themselves and keep a roof over their heads. Their financial straits lead to finite resources being diverted from family support to emergency relief.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson, P, Bradbury, B, Hill, T & Wong, M 2020, *Poverty in Australia 2020: part 1, overview*, ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No. 3, ACOSS, Sydney.

<sup>2</sup> Elliott, M 2019, 'Child welfare inequalities in a time of rising numbers of children entering out-of-home care', *The British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 581-597.

<sup>3</sup> Tennant, D & Bowey, K 2019, *The impact of social security reforms on single mothers and their children*, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne.

Providing adequate income to individuals and parents improves their wellbeing and the wellbeing of children in their care, increases their productive capacity and reduces risk factors for involvement in statutory or other service systems.<sup>4</sup>

The social security system has the potential to be a key preventative measure, providing an adequate standard of living to support family functioning by meeting basic needs and minimising sources of stress. While parents and carers are responsible for the care of their children, governments play a critical role in creating the conditions that enable caregivers to effectively fulfil their parenting role in raising healthy, thriving children.

*Safe and supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031* states that 'it will focus on areas where there is the biggest need to have the greatest impact and avoid duplication'.<sup>5</sup> It also notes that:

Early support is critical to strengthen families and help children to thrive. This includes helping children, young people and families get access to material basics, health services and education, which is their fundamental right.<sup>6</sup>

Importantly, the National Framework acknowledges income support as a service that supports child safety. As the sole responsibility of the Australian Government, income support is a key area where significant and immediate improvements could be made that cannot be duplicated in other areas of the service system.

An adequate reliable income provides the foundation for wellbeing and is an important protective factor for child safety. While state and territory governments work on service delivery improvements in the areas of mental health, alcohol and other drugs, family violence and homelessness under the National Framework, a truly national approach would see the Australian Government delivering improvements in the area of social security.

Research on the impacts of the Coronavirus Supplement clearly show that increased income has immediate and short-term benefits for individuals, families and the economy.<sup>7</sup> If such income was provided for longer, it would have extensive long-term benefits.

### **Recommendation**

Increase the base rate of working-age social security payments to an adequate, liveable level and regularly review rates to maintain payment levels above the poverty line.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020, Burden of disease, 23 July, viewed 3 December 2021, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/burden-of-disease>>; Bennett, K, Booth, A, Gair, S & Thorpe, R 2020, 'Poverty is the problem – not parents: so tell me, child protection worker, how can you help?', *Children Australia*, vol. 45, no. 4, pp. 207-214; Klein, E, Cook, K, Maury, M & Bowey, K 2021, *Social security and time use during COVID-19*, Swinburne University of Technology & Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Social Services 2021, *Safe and supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Social Services 2021, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Klein et al. 2021.

## The case for a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner

The Centre strongly supports advocacy by [SNAICC – National Voice for our Children and the Family Matters campaign](#) for a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner to represent the interests of Aboriginal children, advocate for their rights and needs, and elevate their voices to drive positive change.

In 2019-20, the rate of Indigenous children receiving child protection services was 166 per 1000 (almost 8 times the rate for non-Indigenous children), an increase from 151 per 1000 in 2016-17. At 30 June 2020, one in 18 Indigenous children were in out-of-home care, a figure 11 times the rate for non-Indigenous children.<sup>8</sup>

Consistent with Government commitments under Closing the Gap and the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, the establishment of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner is an important mechanism for hearing and acting on the voices of children at the national policy level.<sup>9</sup> To meet the responsibilities of the role, the Commissioner must be funded adequately to consult with Aboriginal children and young people across the country and support their participation in policy processes.

In Victoria, a dedicated Aboriginal Children's Commissioner was appointed in 2013 and this role has strongly contributed to initiating major government reforms and achieving an increased focus on improving outcomes for Aboriginal children. The Commissioner for Children and Young People has stated that an Aboriginal Children's Commissioner in Victoria has seen 'self-determination and connection to family, community, culture and Country placed at the heart of solutions to the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the child protection, out-of-home care and youth justice systems'.<sup>10</sup>

### Recommendation

Establish, appoint and adequately resource a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2021, *Data tables: Child protection Australia 2019-20*, Child Welfare series no. 74, Cat no. CWS 78, AIHW, Canberra.

<sup>9</sup> For example: *Safe and supported states*, 'Children's Commissioners in Australia play a vital role in protecting the rights of children and young people, including their right to be heard' (p. 57).

<sup>10</sup> Commission for Children and Young People 2021, Farewell to Justin Mohamed, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, and champion for systemic reform, 3 December, viewed 3 December 2021, <<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/news/farewell-to-justin-mohamed-commissioner-for-aboriginal-children-and-young-people-and-champion-for-systemic-reform/>>.

## Boosting training and employment opportunities

Post-care outcomes for care leavers in Australia are below average across all wellbeing domains and care leavers continue to participate in tertiary education at lower levels than their peers.<sup>11</sup> This has significant implications for their future life outcomes, including entry into the employment market, ability to become financially independent, and capacity to contribute financially to the nation's economy.

Young people in care and individuals who have left care face significant challenges regardless of which state or territory they live in.<sup>12</sup> One promising solution, the Raising Expectations program is a cross-sectoral collaboration of universities, TAFEs, community services and government, managed by the Centre on behalf of a consortium, and ready to be scaled up nationally.

The Raising Expectations program provides a unique platform for these sectors to work together to improve access to tertiary education for people who have been in care. The program provides dedicated support to enable care leavers to access and successfully complete vocational and/or higher education study.

The model has contributed to tangible improvements in education and life opportunities for individuals who have been in care. In addition to increasing the number of care leavers enrolled in further or higher education across the three founding tertiary institutions since the program began, Raising Expectations has also delivered system-level changes by building the capability of the higher education workforce to respond in ways that support post-secondary educational achievement for care leavers.

A Deloitte analysis of the Social Return on Investment for Raising Expectations, commissioned by the program's partners, found that for every dollar invested, the program generates an estimated minimum of \$1.80 in economic and social benefits, and the social benefits of Raising Expectations substantially outweigh the costs. Scaling up this proven model across the country would improve the life opportunities for many care leavers in each jurisdiction through improved access to post-secondary education. This would be a significant national initiative which could also be used as a model for supporting other vulnerable groups disengaged, or at risk of disengaging, from education.

### Recommendation

Invest in a national expansion of the successful Raising Expectations program to improve access to post-secondary education for those with care experience.

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<sup>11</sup> 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, Melbourne.

<sup>12</sup> For example, an inquiry by the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) found limited post-care supports available for young people after leaving care in Victoria. Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) 2020, [Keep caring: systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care](#), CCYP, Melbourne. A 2013 NSW Ombudsman report highlighted the critical importance of young care leavers having well developed plans to support transition to independent living. See [https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/10880/The-continuing-need-to-better-support-young-people-leaving-care-web.pdf](https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0017/10880/The-continuing-need-to-better-support-young-people-leaving-care-web.pdf) (retrieved 27 Jan 2022).