

## Policy Paper

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# A strong future for young people leaving out-of-home care

UnitingCare Children Young People and Families position paper on leaving care and aftercare

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# Introduction

## About UnitingCare Children Young People and Families

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (UnitingCare CYPF) provides a range of services, across the continuum of care, to children, young people and families in disadvantaged communities in NSW.

UnitingCare CYPF is a major provider of out-of-home care (OOHC) in NSW including the Mid North Coast, Orana Far West and Western Sydney. These programs include foster care and residential care.

Jaanimili, our Aboriginal Services and Development Unit, is leading a partnership to establish a new Aboriginal OOHC service, Ngurambang, covering the Dubbo, Narromine and Wellington areas. Our OOHC Western Sydney program is also working with Gaba Yula to establish a new Aboriginal OOHC service in Western Sydney.

UnitingCare CYPF also provides aftercare support for young people who have left formal care. The ACE Aftercare program provides support to young people who are transitioning from OOHC aged 15 to 25 in South West Sydney and parts of the South Coast area of NSW. We also have a caseworker in Western Sydney and a part-time case worker in Dubbo who work with young people who have left UnitingCare Burnside's OOHC programs.

## Why are we focusing on transitions from OOHC?

UnitingCare CYPF is deeply concerned about the poor outcomes experienced by young people who are transitioning from OOHC. These young people are among the most vulnerable, disadvantaged and traumatised group UnitingCare CYPF works with in our programs.

Young people leaving care or who have left care are over-represented in the statistics on homelessness, early school leaving and contact with the criminal justice system. They are also more likely to have children at an early age and are at greater risk of having their own child taken into care.

Improving outcomes for young people who are leaving care requires a dual focus on improving the quality of care and providing better support to young people as they are transitioning from care.

Indeed, international research consistently identifies four key reforms that are needed to improve outcomes for care leavers:

1. Improving the quality of care and placement stability
2. Enabling a more gradual and flexible transition from care
3. Good preparation and planning
4. Continued access to aftercare support.<sup>1</sup>

UnitingCare CYPF will continue to advocate for policy reforms to improve quality of care both while children and young people are in OOHC and when they have left care.

As an organisation, we are strongly committed to improving the support available to young people who are transitioning from OOHC. This involves practice development as well as research and policy work looking at the system as a whole.

UnitingCare CYPF is currently developing a good practice framework for leaving care planning and preparation. This will include a system of alerts for caseworkers about developmentally appropriate tasks from the age of 15. The focus of the approach is on creative activities that engage young people to prepare for the transition and develop new skills in an enjoyable way.

We have recently conducted a review of Australian and international policy and program approaches relevant to improving outcomes for young people who are transitioning from OOHC to adulthood.<sup>2</sup> This paper sets out the key learnings from this review. The paper focuses on the policy changes that are needed for young people who are transitioning from care across the leaving and aftercare phases. It includes a six-point plan to improve outcomes for young people who are transitioning from OOHC to adulthood in NSW.

## Summary – six key actions to improve outcomes for young people who are transitioning from care

1. Give young people the option to remain in OOHC until they are 21
2. Develop a consistent and effective framework for leaving care planning
3. Provide priority access to universal government services including social housing, health and assistance with the costs of education and training
4. Increase investment in specialist aftercare support services, including a focus on young parents
5. Increase availability of accommodation options which meet the needs of young people transitioning from OOHC
6. Strengthen processes for data collection, monitoring and evaluation.

## What happens to young people leaving care?

Negative experiences before coming into care, in-care, and after leaving care all have cumulative effects on young people's ability to successfully transition to adulthood.<sup>3</sup> International research has consistently shown that young people leaving care are at high risk of social exclusion, poverty and poor outcomes in later life.<sup>4</sup>

The 2009 Create Foundation (Create) survey, found that:

- 35% of the young people leaving care were homeless in the first year of leaving
- 46% of young men and 22% of young women with a care experience had been involved in the juvenile justice system
- 65% of young people did not complete Year 12
- 29% were unemployed (compared to the national average of 9.75%)
- 28% were already parents themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Young people leaving care are also more likely to be socially isolated and lack informal social support from family and friends.<sup>6</sup>

Some care leavers experience a 'cluster' of negative outcomes including substance abuse, mental health issues, unstable housing, periods of unemployment and dependence on welfare benefits, and offending.<sup>7</sup> Young people who are at particular risk of poor outcomes include those who have had multiple placements while in care and those who leave care at a younger age.<sup>8</sup>

There are also a number of groups of care leavers who are at particular risk of poor outcomes and who need more support, including Aboriginal young people, young parents, care leavers with a disability and unaccompanied minors.<sup>9</sup>

A recent review by the NSW Ombudsman highlights continuing concerns about inadequate planning for leaving care and provision of aftercare support (see p. 8-9).

# The policy context

## Policy development at the national level

'Transitioning to independence' was identified as a national priority under the first three-year action plan (2009-2012) of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009 – 2020 (the National Framework).

Under the First Action Plan for the National Framework, all governments agreed to a nationally consistent approach to planning and supporting an effective transition from OOHC.<sup>10</sup>

Under the nationally consistent approach, planning is to commence no later than age 15 and continue up to age 25 where the young person needs or desires ongoing assistance. Consistent with research evidence on good practice, the process is intended to be flexible, based on the level of maturity and skill development of young people, rather than simply their age. The approach is represented as a continuum involving three overlapping phases: preparation; transition; and aftercare. The focus of the approach is on the young person as central and empowered to be an active and informed participant. It covers the core elements that need to be considered for each young person across a range of life domains.

The nationally consistent approach to planning was developed to align with the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care, also a priority project under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. The National Standards include a requirement that all young people have a transition plan commencing at age 15.<sup>11</sup> The intent of this standard is that young people transitioning to independence have practical help to prepare for the future.

Community and Disability Services Ministers have agreed to a schedule of national measurement and reporting arrangements for the National Standards for Out-of-home Care. Measures will be progressively introduced so that by 2015, there will be 22 measures reported against the full set of National Standards. The key measures relating to the transition from care are:



- the proportion of young people aged 15 years and over who have a current leaving care plan
- the proportion of young people who, at the time of exit from OOHC, report they are receiving adequate assistance to prepare for adult life.

Public reporting on the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care is through the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children Annual Report to COAG. At 30 June 2012, an estimated 77 per cent of young people aged 15 years and over had a current and approved leaving care plan. However, this estimate was based on data available from Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia only.<sup>12</sup>

## Policy frameworks in NSW

### NSW Child Protection Legislative Reform Process

The child protection legislative reforms passed through the NSW Parliament on 26 March 2014. Under the reforms, where restoration is not possible, there is increased emphasis on adoption and long-term guardianship. By strengthening this approach, the NSW Government hopes over time to reduce the number of children and young people in long-term foster care.

UnitingCare CYPF supports the increased focus on permanency arrangements which will provide greater stability for children and young people who can no longer live safely with their birth families.

However, the need for long-term OOHC for children and young people will also continue. There will be children who do not have the option of long-term guardianship to a relative or kin and for whom adoption will not be suitable. This is particularly relevant for older children and adolescents, or children who have voiced an opposition to adoption.

These young people require a well-thought out service system to address their high level of needs when they are transitioning from formal care.

In NSW, recent policy attention has been focussed on transitioning the delivery of OOHC programs from the Department of Family and

Community Services to the NGO sector and improving the quality and stability of placements for children and young people in care. It is also important that good work is not undone by not having the necessary planning and supports in place when these children become young adults and leave formal care.

As Philip Mendes argues,

providing adequate supports for care leavers in Australia is relatively cheap given the small number of care leavers in any one year, and will provide substantial social and economic gains for both the young people concerned and Australian society more generally.<sup>13</sup>

### **Leaving care planning**

According to Community Services data, 1315 young people living in NSW aged 15 to 17 exited OOHC in 2012-13.<sup>14</sup>

Under the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*, designated agencies with supervisory responsibility for a child or young person in OOHC have responsibilities to prepare the young person in their care for leaving OOHC.<sup>15</sup> Designated agencies are required to prepare and implement a plan, in consultation with the young person, before the young person leaves OOHC.

However, a Create survey and two reviews by the NSW Ombudsman have all found a wide gap between policy and practice in leaving care planning and implementation in NSW.

The 2011 Create survey found large state and territory differences in leaving care planning, with NSW and Tasmania performing particularly poorly.<sup>16</sup> Fewer young people in these states had leaving care plans and those that did had low levels of confidence in the plans being useful.

This echoed the findings of a review of leaving care arrangements conducted by the NSW Ombudsman in 2009. The review found that most of the young people in the sample group left care without an endorsed leaving care plan.<sup>17</sup>

In August 2013, the NSW Ombudsman published a report on a follow-up review which looked at a group of 90 young people who left care in the last quarter of 2011.<sup>18</sup> Most of the young people in the review group were in placements with Community Services, with 10 young people in NGO placements.

The review found that there had been no significant improvement in leaving care practice since 2009. As in 2009, a large majority (78%) of the group left care without an endorsed plan. Without this endorsement, a young person is unable to access financial support to assist them in their transition to independence at the time they leave care.

The Ombudsman also raised particular concerns about a failure to address the specific needs of high risk young people, including young mothers, Aboriginal young people and young people in juvenile detention prior to leaving care.

### Aftercare support

In 1996, NSW became the first state to introduce state-wide services for care leavers.<sup>19</sup> This funding was provided in response to the findings of the Wood Royal Commission report into Police Corruption and a study by Cashmore and Paxton<sup>20</sup> which both highlighted the poor outcomes of young people who are transitioning from OOHC.

As well as providing aftercare support, the programs have a consultative role in supporting OOHC agencies and the department of Family and Community Services (FACS) to develop leaving care plans with young people. This also provides an opportunity for the workers to build rapport with the young person and assess their needs for aftercare support.

In the last decade, we have seen the numbers of children and young people in care continue to grow. In this time, there have been only small increases to funding for aftercare services, which fall far short of matching the increased number of young people in OOHC over the same time period.

For example, our ACE AfterCare program covers a very large area spanning South West Sydney and parts of the South Coast of NSW. The service, like other aftercare providers, has received no increase in funding

beyond CPI since it was established in 1997. Over this time, the number of referrals has increased substantially but the number of staff has remained unchanged.

The disparity between the level of need and the funding level means that some young people leaving care are missing out on support or do not get it in a timely way.

Aftercare services are required to give priority to young people with high and complex needs. This means that many young people without such high level needs may not receive a service at all, or have long waiting times, by which time their problems may escalate and go into crisis. Also, sometimes the initial referral may indicate that the needs are not so high, but much more difficult issues may be uncovered as our staff begin to work with the young person. These issues may involve, for example, complex emotional issues relating to their childhood experiences of abuse and trauma, mental health or substance abuse issues.

### **Geographical gaps in access to aftercare services**

There are also geographical gaps in the provision of specialist aftercare services particularly in regional and rural areas of the state. It is notable that in the review of support for young people who are leaving care, the NSW Ombudsman commented that,

... it is noteworthy that there is no funded specialist aftercare service operating in the State's Western region, where there are disproportionate numbers of Indigenous people.<sup>21</sup>

## The way forward

How young people fare after leaving care is not predetermined by their past experiences, and *'there is considerable scope at the leaving care stage to provide young people turning points and fresh opportunities for change'*.<sup>22</sup>

A sustained whole-of-government approach is needed to improve outcomes for young people transitioning from OOHC to adulthood, with immediate through to longer-term measures. From our research and policy work and consultations with our staff, UnitingCare CYPF has identified six key action areas that need to be addressed to promote strong futures for young people leaving care.

### 1. Give young people the option to stay in OOHC longer, up to the age of 21

It is now increasingly common for young people to live at home with their parents, or remain financially dependent on them, beyond the school years, and often up to the mid-twenties. They also have the security of knowing they have a 'safety net' to return to if things do not work out when they leave home.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, young people who have grown up in care experience a rapid and abrupt end to formal support from the child protection system between the ages of 16 and 18.

Young people growing up in care are more vulnerable and have less support and resources than other young people. We have not, as yet, reduced the poor experiences that some children and young people have experienced in care, including multiple placements and difficulty in accessing a full suite of services to support them to manage experiences of trauma and abuse. Yet, government policies in Australia are framed around the expectation that all young people leave care at the age of 18, regardless of their personal readiness.

There is an international consensus among researchers and practitioners that the transition process needs to be much more gradual and flexible, based on the levels of maturity and the needs of the young person rather than simply age.<sup>24</sup>

When it comes to leaving care, age does matter. Research in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) shows that young people who remain in care later generally have better outcomes.

Changes to the law which passed through the English Parliament in March 2014 give young people the right to continue to live with their carers until they are 21, with financial support, if that is what they want.<sup>25</sup> The Government has allocated £40 million to support these new arrangements.

This builds on the success of a pilot program 'Staying Put', which was trialled in 11 local authorities since 2008. The evaluation found that young people who stayed on with carers were twice as likely to be in full-time education at 19 as those who did not.<sup>26</sup> Those who did not stay put were more likely to experience housing instability after they left care.

Similar legislation which allows young people to stay with foster carers until the age of 21 has recently been passed in both Scotland and Wales.<sup>27</sup>

In the US, policy and legislative reform has also focused on extending foster care services beyond the age of 18.

The Midwest evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, a longitudinal study of young people in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin, compared the outcomes of young people who were still in care at 19 with those who had already left care. Young people who remained in care for an additional year were more than twice as likely to be continuing their education.<sup>28</sup> They were also more likely to delay pregnancy<sup>29</sup> and were less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system.<sup>30</sup>

This research provided the impetus for legislative change. The *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act 2008* gives states the option of allowing eligible young people to remain 'in care' until they are 21.<sup>31</sup> States are able to claim federal reimbursement for the costs of this extended care. Young people can be living in a foster home, residential setting or living semi-independently.

In Australia, the ACT Government is also looking at a more flexible service model, which would enable young people to remain with carers beyond the age of 18.<sup>32</sup>

Allowing young people to remain in care longer is consistent with research on brain development which shows that critical parts of the brain required for effective decision-making are not fully developed until the mid-twenties.<sup>33</sup> The pre-frontal cortex, which is involved with social interaction and self-awareness and checks risk-taking behaviour, is the part of the brain that changes most during adolescence. And research tells us that brain development of children who have suffered trauma is delayed.<sup>34</sup> The approach to 'leaving care' in Australia rushes young people to independence at a time where they often lack the maturity, experience and the ability to make good decisions.<sup>35</sup>

### **Ensure all young people who have grown up in care have the option to stay in care longer**

It is important that all young people who have grown up in care have the opportunity for more gradual transitions from care. This means there will need to be a range of options including extended foster and kinship care placements and semi-independent living arrangements. It is also essential that young people who have left care have the opportunity to re-enter care if they are struggling to cope.

While there may be additional costs in implementing the proposal, this would be off-set by longer-term savings. The US research indicates that the potential benefits of allowing young people to stay in care until they turn 21 will more than offset the costs.<sup>36</sup>

The decision to stay in care would be optional depending on the wishes of the young person. It is important that young people feel that they have a choice to leave when they feel ready rather than feeling forced to leave or 'chucked out' at 16 or 17. This will also require a shift in the expectation of carers and workers that young people should move on. While the decision would rest with the young person, caseworkers can be proactive in encouraging young people to remain in care longer as now occurs in the UK (both before the young person turns 18 and after).

Not all young people want to remain in care longer, irrespective of what professionals believe to be in their best interests. An appropriate suite of support must be available to meet the needs of those who choose to leave formal care earlier, particularly given that these young people may be the most vulnerable and have the most complex needs.<sup>37</sup>

#### **What is required?**

- The NSW Government should investigate and implement extended care arrangements for young people in OOHC to the age of 21 years. This should include legislative change if this is required.

## **2. Develop a consistent and effective framework for leaving care planning**

There is a strong association between good preparation and planning in the transition process and positive post-care experiences.<sup>38</sup> However, too many young people in NSW are leaving OOHC without adequate preparation and planning.

The 2011 Ombudsman's report on leaving care arrangements emphasises that Community Services needs to develop a uniform system across the OOHC sector which:

- flags to caseworkers that planning should start at age 15, and
- allows for monitoring of key milestones in preparation and endorsement of leaving care plans (see further discussion of monitoring processes below).

As the Ombudsman has emphasised, to be effective, leaving care plans need to clearly identify roles and responsibilities of all relevant agencies for implementing the plan. This may include, for example, the involvement of the NGO with designated case management responsibility, Community Services, and other government agencies such as Juvenile Justice.

It is critical that the system includes a consistent process which provides for authorisation of financial supports in an equitable and timely way. Without this authorisation, leaving care plans cannot be implemented effectively.



The NSW Ombudsman reviews in 2009 and 2011 both identified significant problems with Community Services' processes for approving financial assistance to care leavers in a timely fashion. Our staff also report that accessing financial support for young people from Community Services to support implementation of leaving care plans often requires intensive advocacy even where the Department has previously approved leaving care plans.

The development of the framework for leaving care planning should involve strong consultation with the Children's Guardian and NGO sector. This should include consultation with Aboriginal organisations on the specific needs of Aboriginal children and young people.

#### **What is required?**

- The NSW Department of Families and Communities should develop a uniform system for leaving care planning across the OOHC consistent with the recommendation of the NSW Ombudsman. The development of the system should involve strong consultation with the Children's Guardian and the NGO sector.
- The system must include a consistent and transparent process which provides for authorisation of financial support to care leavers in an equitable and timely way.

### **3. Provide priority access to universal government services**

The 2008 *Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW* emphasised the need for an interagency approach to improve outcomes for young people transitioning from OOHC, including priority access to a range of Government services.<sup>39</sup> However, it appears that the only action undertaken through the Keep Them Safe Action Plan to address the needs of young people leaving care was the development of a leaving care training resource for carers.<sup>40</sup>

Mechanisms need to be developed in NSW to ensure that universal services are more responsive to and give priority to young people who have left formal care.

Young people who have been in the care of the state need to have priority access to government services because they are more vulnerable as a result of their experiences and do not have family and other supports that others their age generally have available to them.<sup>41</sup>

This should include:

- preferential access to priority social housing – all young people leaving care should be able to register automatically for priority housing from age 15, as occurs in Western Australia
- assistance with meeting the costs of education and training, including fee waivers for care leavers enrolling in TAFE courses (as occurs in Victoria, South Australia and Victoria) and career advice.
- priority access to disability and health services, including support in addressing mental health issues. A health check should also occur for all young people prior to leaving care, as occurs in South Australia.

Care leavers who are pregnant and young mothers also need to be given priority to access supported home visiting programs and early education and care.

The NSW Ombudsman's recent report on leaving care highlights particular concerns about inadequate planning and support for young people who were in juvenile detention in the 12 months prior to leaving care.<sup>42</sup> In the context of the transition of OOHC to the NGO sector, it is timely to develop a new protocol which clarifies responsibilities and processes for joint work in planning for leaving care. The protocol should also focus on providing more intensive, holistic support to this group of vulnerable young people in the post-care period.

It is notable that in the UK, there is a strong cross-departmental strategy to improve outcomes for young people leaving care. The Care leaver strategy includes measures spanning education, employment, financial support, health, housing, and the justice system.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, South Australia and Western Australia have both developed 'rapid response', as a whole-of-government framework that prioritises service for children and young people who are in OOHC or who are transitioning from care.

### **What is required?**

- The NSW Government should establish or review cross-agency protocols to address the needs of young people who are transitioning from care.
- The cross-agency protocols should include provisions which give young people who are leaving care or who have left care preferential access to services including priority social housing and health. Young women who are pregnant and young mothers who are transitioning from OOHC should have priority access to parenting programs and early childhood education and care.
- The NSW Government should develop a new protocol to guide joint agency work with young people who are in juvenile detention prior to leaving care. The protocol should also focus on providing more intensive, holistic support to these young people in the post-care period.
- The NSW Government should provide assistance with the costs of education and training to young people who are transitioning from care, including fee waivers for young people enrolling in TAFE.
- The development or review of the cross-agency protocols should involve strong consultation with the NGO sector.
- A robust reporting and monitoring system should be developed to ensure that the cross-agency protocols are implemented effectively.

## **4. Increase investment in specialist aftercare support services, including a focus on young parents**

In the last decade, we have seen the numbers of children and young people in care continue to grow. However, while there has been a massive expansion in the state OOHC budget, there has been no matching growth in funding to support young people once they have left formal care. A significant injection of funding is now needed to ensure that services are

able to respond effectively to the numbers of young people who are transitioning from OOHC.

Increased investment is also needed to address the gaps in these services in regional and remote areas of the state, including the Western region.

It is also critical that aftercare services have funding security. Since 2011, aftercare services have been on a series of six-month funding contracts. This funding uncertainty impacts on the ability of services to attract and retain good staff and makes planning difficult. It also means that services are reluctant to go out and actively promote the program. Consequently, many young people transitioning from care are likely to be unaware of the program or how they can get help with difficulties.

It is notable that the Commonwealth Government is introducing five-year contracts for providers funded under the Family and Communities Program.

### Improving support for young parents

The development of a model for aftercare services should include a strong focus on providing support to young parents. Holistic support programs are needed to support young women who become young mothers to prevent the intergenerational cycle of children coming into care.

Young women who have been in care are at greater risk of becoming pregnant at an earlier age. A 2006 study by Cashmore and Paxton in NSW found that nearly a third of the young women were pregnant or had a child within 12 months of leaving care.<sup>44</sup>

There is also some evidence that young women who have been in care are at greater risk of coming to the attention of child protection authorities and of having their own child taken into care. A recent review by the NSW Ombudsman of leaving care found that of the seven young mothers in the review group, three had their children removed from their care before their own care order expired. In only one of these cases did the leaving care plan adequately consider early childhood education and care and other supports.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, a study of 60 care leavers in Victoria in 2005 found that 17 became a parent either in care or soon after leaving care. More than half of the children of the 17 parents in the survey group were in care under orders.<sup>46</sup>

Young women who are pregnant and young mothers need help with emotional and practical issues including financial help with the expenses of caring for a new baby, help with parenting skills, stable housing, and social support. Young fathers should also be encouraged to participate in the parenting process. Support should specifically focus on providing young parents with the skills and resources that will prevent their own children being placed in care.<sup>47</sup>

Providing opportunities for young people to experience a more gradual and flexible transition process is also particularly relevant to young parents. Young mothers who are receiving crucial support from foster carers that is enabling them to successfully care for their child should not be expected to leave when they turn 18.<sup>48</sup>

#### **What is required?**

- Increase NSW Government funding of aftercare services to enable services to respond effectively to the increased number of young people leaving OOHC.
- Address the geographical gaps in provision of aftercare services in rural and regional areas, including establishment of a new service to cover the Western region of NSW.
- Provide funding security for aftercare services by providing five-year contracts.

## **5. Increase availability of accommodation options which meet the needs of young people transitioning from OOHC**

Accessing and maintaining appropriate accommodation is one of the most challenging tasks confronting young people who are transitioning from OOHC. Young people who are transitioning from OOHC face particular

problems in entering and remaining in the private rental market. They have few financial resources to draw on and are often discriminated against because of their age and lack of rental history.<sup>49</sup>

A study by the Australian Housing and Research Institute (AHURI) found that many young people struggle to find and maintain appropriate housing when they leave care resulting in chronic housing instability and homelessness.<sup>50</sup> Many young people are exiting care into inappropriate accommodation including refuges and boarding houses. Others are forced to accept housing in areas where they have few connections and that are far removed from transport and employment opportunities.

Housing and accommodation support is a critical aspect in assisting young people leaving formal care to make a smooth transition. Our staff report that until people have stable and secure accommodation it is very difficult to work with them on other issues.

This is supported by research which shows that having safe, secure and affordable accommodation provides a stable base to make progress in other areas, particularly education and employment.<sup>51</sup> A study conducted in Victoria found that young people who had stable accommodation at the time of leaving care were three times more likely to be employed.<sup>52</sup> Research by the University of York also found that good housing was the factor most closely associated with good mental health outcomes among care leavers.<sup>53</sup>

Currently there are very few housing options tailored to the needs of young people leaving care in NSW. Existing supported accommodation options are characterised by short-term stays and no clear exit strategy.<sup>54</sup>

Strategies to improve housing outcomes require planned investment in an appropriate range of supported and independent accommodation options to meet differing needs.<sup>55</sup> As outlined previously, this should include formal partnerships and protocols with public and social housing providers.

While different accommodation options are important, the expectation that young people are ready to move to independent living at such a young age is often unrealistic. Transitional or supported housing can provide care leavers with an important 'middle way' between care and complete independence particularly for those least prepared for independent living

due to their age, care experiences, life skills or emotional or mental health.<sup>56</sup>

‘Housing plus support’ models recognise that many young people who are transitioning from OOHC have few positive relationships and rely on professional support to deal with any difficulties or crisis they encounter. This approach also enables young people to move to greater independence at their own pace and in a more gradual way.

To be effective, transitional and supported housing models need to include both accommodation and support and have access to a range of housing options. For example, St Luke’s Anglicare in Victoria leaving and aftercare service has been particularly successful in providing care leavers with successful transition into secure housing.<sup>57</sup> St Luke’s is able to facilitate access to a number of housing options including, transitional units, public housing, private rental, private board arrangements, and head-leased properties. This is supported by funding from the Victorian Department of Human Services and the Office of Housing.

#### **What is required?**

- The NSW Government should expand transitional housing and support programs for young people leaving care, such as the OOHC Supported Independent Living Program, so that they are available in all areas of the state.
- As the OOHC Supported Independent Living Program targets young people aged 16 to 18, models of transitional housing also need to be developed which cater for young people over the age of 18.
- Models for transitional and supported housing should include **both accommodation and support** and provide access to a range of housing options. This should include, for example, transitional units, public housing, private rental, private board, and head-leased properties.

## 6. Strengthen processes for data collection, monitoring and evaluation

Currently there is no process in place which enables the Department of Family and Community Services and its partner NGO agencies to demonstrate compliance with policy on preparation and implementation of leaving care plans.

The Department of Family and Community Services should develop a mechanism for collecting and reporting data on leaving care and aftercare in line with the recommendation of the NSW Ombudsman.<sup>58</sup> The monitoring framework should include:

- collection of local, regional and state-wide aggregated data on commencement, completion and endorsement of leaving care plans
- support provided and outcome measures for young people who have left care.

### **What is required?**

- The Department of Family and Community Services should develop a mechanism for collecting and reporting data on leaving care and aftercare in line with the recommendation of the NSW Ombudsman.
- The framework should include the key data measures developed for the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care, including the proportion of young people who, at the time of exit from OOHC, report they are receiving adequate assistance to prepare for adult life.
- It should also include data on outcome measures for young people who have left care, including the number of children being removed from young women who are in care or who have left care.
- This data should be publicly reported on annually in the Department of Family and Community Services Annual Report and annual statistical report.



## Conclusion

Young people who are transitioning from OOHC are at high risk of social exclusion, poverty and poor outcomes in later life. In part, this is due to the early and sudden nature of the transition process, poor preparation and planning, and lack of support after they have left care. Currently, too often, young people's experience of leaving formal care is one of 'sink or swim'.

In comparing legislative and policy frameworks, it is clear that the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US) have progressed much further than Australia in addressing the needs of young people who are transitioning from care. Both have moved towards extending care to the age of 21.

In the UK, there has also been a shift from discretionary legislation to strong legal duties. In contrast, in most Australian jurisdictions including NSW, the provision of aftercare support remains discretionary.<sup>59</sup>

From our review of policy and program approaches<sup>60</sup>, it is also clear that NSW has lagged behind other Australian states and territories in its attention to, and investment in, policy and programs for young people transitioning from OOHC.

For example, both South Australia and Western Australia have developed *Rapid Response* frameworks which provide a whole-of-government service response for children and young people in OOHC and post-care to 25 years. In both states, mechanisms have been developed which give young people who have left formal care priority access to social housing, education and training, and healthcare. The Victorian Government has invested an additional \$16.9 million over four years to improve education support for young people leaving care. It has also established a state-wide initiative to provide culturally appropriate support for Aboriginal young people who are transitioning from OOHC.

This issue is not new. The 2008 *Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection in NSW* found that young people leaving care are one of the most vulnerable groups in our society, but do not always receive the support they need to settle their lives and find accommodation and employment.<sup>61</sup> Two reviews by the NSW Ombudsman have also

highlighted poor performance by the NSW Government in planning and support for young people in the transition process.

The NSW Government has developed several trial programs such as *Stepping Off Starting Out* and the *Young People Leaving Care Support Service* pilot program on the North Coast of NSW. Both of these programs were jointly funded by the Federal Government under the National Partnerships Agreement on Homelessness. However, to date, this has not led to any new state-wide policy initiatives.

Now that the OOHC transition process is well underway and the new Child Protection legislation has passed through Parliament, it is time to give serious attention to this issue. Without a renewed policy focus and investment in leaving and aftercare support we are at risk of perpetuating inter-generational cycles of disadvantage.

Over time, there will be savings in OOHC due to less young people coming into care. Some of these savings should be redirected to support for leaving and aftercare to break the cycle of disadvantage.

By providing good support to young people as they transition from care we can reduce their progression into prolonged use of high cost services. As Create argues, *'A relatively small investment now will save a huge social and economic cost in the future.'*<sup>62</sup>

Economic research in Victoria found that the costs of supporting a young adult who has been in care are extremely high compared to the costs of providing a modest suite of integrated support for care leavers at the time they transition from OOHC.<sup>63</sup> This was based on the direct costs to the state which result from the poor outcomes experienced by young people leaving care such as becoming homeless, being unemployed, entering the juvenile justice system or having their own children removed. The study estimated that for a typical group of 450 young people who leave care in Victoria each year, the direct lifetime cost to the State resulting from the poor outcomes was \$738,741 per young person leaving care. The report provides a clear rationale for governments to invest in support for young people transitioning to adulthood.

As the authors conclude,

...act now as a prudent economist would, spend a little now to save a lot in the future. The costs of doing nothing is detrimental to young people, society and the economy at large.<sup>64</sup>

UnitingCare CYPF looks forward to working with our colleagues across Government and the NGO social welfare sector to promote implementation of policy approaches that will build strong futures for young people who are transitioning from OOHC.

## Further resources

UnitingCare CYPF has also conducted an extensive review of policy and program approaches being used in other Australian states and territories and overseas to improve transitions from OOHC. This paper also includes a more detailed overview of the research evidence relevant to improving outcomes for young people who are transitioning from OOHC to adulthood. The paper is available at:

[http://www.childrenyoungpeopleandfamilies.org.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/102796/UCCYPF-young-people-transitiioning-from-OOHC-to-adulthod.pdf](http://www.childrenyoungpeopleandfamilies.org.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/102796/UCCYPF-young-people-transitiioning-from-OOHC-to-adulthod.pdf)

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