CREATE Foundation Response
to
Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry

CREATE Foundation is the peak body representing the voices of all children and young people in out-of-home care. CREATE is the only organisation in Australia established for the sole purpose of advocating on behalf of children and young people in care at both national and state levels.

CREATE's core mission to create a better life for children and young people in out-of-home care is achieved through:

- *connecting* children and young people to each other, CREATE and their community
- *empowering* children and young people to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and skills that enable them to have a voice and be heard
- *changing* the care system, in consultation with children and young people, through advocacy to improve policies, practices and services.

CREATE Foundation (CREATE) commends the Victorian Government for "establishing the *Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry* to comprehensively investigate systemic problems in Victoria's child protection system and make recommendations to strengthen and improve the protection and support of vulnerable young Victorians." (p.1)

CREATE has confined its response primarily to those issues raised under Term of Reference 3 which have direct relevance to children and young people in out-of-home care.

CREATE is pleased to provide the following comments in the spirit of supporting and progressing such a critical agenda for children and young people in general, and for children and young people in out-of-home care, in particular.

3. *The quality, structure, role and functioning of: family services; statutory child protection services, including reporting, assessment, investigation procedures and responses; and out-of-home care, including permanency planning and transitions; and what improvements may be made to better protect the best interests of children and support better outcomes for children and families.*

c. *Out-of-home care, including permanency planning and transitions*

3.5 What are the strengths and weaknesses of the range of our current out-of-home care services (including respite care, foster care of varying duration, kinship care, permanent care and residential care), as well as supports offered to children and young people leaving care?

CREATE considers that the range of current out-of-home care services:

- provide an increased capacity to select the most appropriate type of placement for a child or young person to protect and promote the best interests of that child or young person
- allows for the 'automatic' creation of a multi-dimensional care team with the necessary skills and knowledge to assess and meet the specific needs and issues of a child or young person.

However, CREATE considers that these strengths have the potential to (i) cause confusion for children and young people and (ii) compromise the quality of continued care for children and young people.

Through conversations with children and young people in-care, CREATE has identified that the different characteristics of the various types of out-of-home care services may not be fully explained to children and young people which adds to feelings of vulnerability and anxiety when being placed in care or moved to a different type of care. In the case of the latter, young people have reported that the different modes of operation among Community Service Organisations (CSOs) can prove confusing and, therefore, destabilising when there is a lack of consistent messages from care staff.

It is important to note that the lack of consistency for these young people occurs within an existing context of experiential abuse, trauma, fractured relationships and significant loss.

An issue of concern for CREATE is the effective functioning of the care team which can become fractured when roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined at the outset generating the potential to, firstly, impact inter-agency collaboration and communication and, secondly – and most importantly – compromise the quality of service and support provided the child or young person. Furthermore, young people have indicated that when staff changes occur (often precipitated by contracting arrangements) the loss of a significant worker(s) mitigates against a child or young person developing stable and trusting relationships with those assigned to their case.

CREATE is aware of the importance of the suite of leaving care services (eg. Leaving Care Mentoring program, Post Care Support, Referral & Information service, Leaving Care brokerage, and Office of Housing Leaving Care Housing and Support Initiative service) available to young people transitioning from care in Victoria and commends the Department of Human Services and CSOs for the provision of these services. Furthermore, CREATE considers that the quality of support has been significantly strengthened due to the introduction of specialised leaving care/post-care support workers in each region.

CREATE considers that the greatest weaknesses in the supports offered young people leaving care relate to:

(i)   the period of legislated support provision in Victoria for young people transitioning from care to independence is inadequate

(ii)   a lack of compliance with the legislated requirement that all young people leaving care have a leaving care or transition plan

(iii)   the delivery approach to support services does not provide seamless provision

(iv)   the awareness and availability of support services and referrals is inconsistent and insufficient.

3.5.1 How might any identified weaknesses be best addressed? If there are places where these services work more effectively than elsewhere, what appear to be the conditions associated with these successes and how might these conditions be replicated elsewhere in the State?

(i)   the period of legislated support provision is inadequate

A review of State and Territory legislative and policy requirements addressing support offered to young people transitioning from care to independence indicates that the age span provided for is 15-25 years in all but two jurisdictions.

In Victoria, legislation pertaining to the duration of support for young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independence indicates that:

▪ planning is to begin above the age of 15 years and at least 12 months prior to the young person exiting care

▪ support is provided up to 21 years of age.

It is CREATE's position that support for young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independence commences no later than 15 years of age and is provided until 25 years of age.

Firstly, the age span of 15-25 years recognises that transitioning from care to independence is a three-phased process that spans:

▪ the preparation phase – planning to transition from care

▪ the transition phase – leaving care and getting established

▪ the after-care phase – gaining independence. (Maunders, Liddell, Liddell & Green, 1999)

Generally speaking, the preparation phase aligns with children still in care, with the transition and after-care phases encompass 18+ year olds – that is, those who have formally 'exited' care upon turning 18 years of age.

While CREATE recognises that optimal preparation for young people leaving care should reflect a gradual introduction during the young person's time in care to the concept of 'moving on' after reaching 18, CREATE strongly recommends that a formalised planning process commences when a young person turns 15 (McDowall, 2009). The specific issues associated with the process are addressed in the next section.

Secondly, CREATE contends that the need to afford young people transitioning from care to independence continued support until 25 years of age recognises:

- the magnitude and complexity of such a major, and often traumatic, event for young people especially when deprived of their family environment
- the continuing support of family and friends that young people in the general population have when they leave home.

A review of the data from the ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey (FCTS), which collected information from 18-34 year olds about leaving the parental home, indicates that:

> Young people ... are now more likely to be living with their parents than they used to be. ... The increase in young people living with their parents may be due to young people leaving home for the first time at a later age, or an increased tendency to move out and later return to their parents' home after some time away, or both. It is now quite common for young people to move out of home, then return later for a time, perhaps due to a change in circumstances or to save to buy their own home. (ABS, 2009:24-25)

Key findings showed that:
- of 18-19 year olds, 82% were still living with their parents
- of 20-24 year olds, 47.2% were still living with their parents. (ABS, 2009:25)

Across the age range of 18-24 years, 49 % of males and 45 % of females had never left home. The most frequently given reasons for not leaving the parental home were:
- financial (41%)
- convenience and/or enjoyment of living at home (36%). (ABS, 2008:9)

The median age for first leaving home for 18-34 year olds, was 20.9 years for males and 19.8 years for females. For 18-24 year olds, the main reasons for first leaving were:
- to be independent (28%)
- to study (23%)
- to live with their partner or get married (14%)
- family conflict (12%)
- for employment or their career (11%) (ABS, 2008)

However, it should be noted that 31% of 20-34 year olds had returned home at some point in time. In fact, the analysis of data relating to 'leaving and returning home', led the Bureau (ABS, 2009) to report that:

> Having left home for the first time, the probability that someone would return home at least once before turning 35 was almost one in two (46%). Of those who do return home, the most common duration away was between one and two years with one-third of returnees expected to return in this period. Seven out of ten people who return to the parental home could be expected to do so in three years. (p.26)

In the absence of a 'safety net' that continued parental support affords, young people leaving care generally experience a more abrupt transition to adulthood and "... have to manage multiple transitions – moving into new accommodation, leaving school, and becoming financially independent at a younger age than their peers who typically can rely on continued help from their families for a number of years" (Johnson et al., 2010:29).

Additional complexities can further exacerbate the ability of many care leavers to manage such multiple transitions, such as those identified by McDowall (2009) as part of his substantial investigation into the current status of transitioning from care in Australia:

- 65% of care leavers did not have (or know about) a Leaving Care (Transitioning) Plan even though this is a legislative requirement in all jurisdictions
- 50% had to leave their placement on their reaching 18 years
- 40% of these had no idea where they would be living
- 35% were homeless for varying periods in the first year of 'interdependence' (average 13 days)
- 65% had not completed Year 12
- one-fifth of those who had left school were expelled
- 13% still found looking after themselves (eg. preparing meals) difficult
- 70% received Centrelink payments
- 50% were wholly dependent on these payments
- 28% were unemployed
- 28% were already parents (60 children were involved).

These statistics and insights into the contemporary social trends concerning the living arrangements of young people and the complexities often associated with leaving care, highlight the disparity that occurs too frequently between the transition to independence experienced by young people with a care background and that of their peers.

CREATE considers that a lack of continuity of support until 25 years of age mitigates against young people in care being well positioned to transition from out of care to independence and adulthood, particularly given the contemporary social trend of young people continuing to live in the parental home longer and then leaving with the option that they can return home at some stage or stages – Boomerang Kids (ABS: 2008, 2009) – a 'luxury' not afforded all young people with a care experience.

It is well documented in both Australian and international literature that life outcomes for children and young people in care are poorer than their counterparts in terms of educational attainment, employability, health and well-being, including mental health. Stigma attached to young people with a care experience impacts on the way in which government and society views them. Expectations are lower, and poorer outcomes are considered "acceptable". Yet, when leaving care, they are considered one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. Given that these young people are "unlikely to have the same kind of personal support networks or financial assistance that a young person leaving the family home might have" (Brouwer, 2010:16), they are at greater risk of experiencing periods of homelessness, unemployment and committing criminal offences often leading to incarceration (Osborn & Bromfield, 2007).

As such, CREATE highly recommends that the Victorian Government, as the corporate parent, enact legislation that support for young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independence commences no later than 15 years of age and is provided until 25 years of age to lessen the degree of disadvantage and vulnerability these young people frequently experience when transitioning from care to independence.

The cost of inaction for a government can prove more expensive. Morgan Disney & Associates (2006) have estimated that different cohorts of care leavers cost governments within Australia an average of $40,000 per person per annum, with 55% being in the high-needs, high-cost categories. These workers projected that the overall cost of support for the group of care leavers they studied, across their life course (ages 16 – 60), is over $2 billion.

However, it must be emphasised that these data were calculated only for those 1,150 young people leaving care in 2003-4. If support were to be provided from 18 to 25 years, in 2010 there would be a total of seven cohorts of care leavers eligible to receive assistance. The total number of young people in this group, based on the data published in *Child Protection Australia* for the years 2003 to 2009, is over 13,000. Using the Morgan Disney average, this would amount to a total annual cost of $520 million, required because of the system's failure to provide adequate initial support. This is a "hidden" cost in addition to the $2.4 billion annual expenditure by government in dealing with the consequences of child abuse and neglect (Bromfield, Holzer, & Lamont, 2010).

(ii) **A lack of compliance with the legislative requirement that all young people leaving care have a leaving care or transition plan**

CREATE holds the unqualified position that formal planning for leaving care should commence no later than 15 years of age and that all young people should leave care with a documented 'plan' – that is, a leaving care or transition plan, meaning a plan for their future.

This position is reflected in the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care (FaHCSIA, 2010: 18) which states that:

Standard 13

Children and young people have a transition from care plan commencing at 15 years old which details support to be provided after leaving care.

What this means

Young people transitioning to independence are to have practical help to prepare for the future.

One of the biggest challenges for all young people is to maintain independent living. Developing these skills and abilities enables them to take their place in society and this requires emotional support and practical assistance.

A transition form care plan is to include, details of support to access affordable housing, health services, education and training, and employment and income support and is to be reviewed regularly.

The National Standards for Out-of-Home Care were agreed to by Community and Disability Services Ministers on 16 December 2010, and will be implemented commencing from 1 July 2011.

CREATE acknowledges that Victoria has a legislated requirement that young people in out-of-home care exit care with a transition plan.

However, research across all jurisdictions undertaken by McDowall (2009) for CREATE indicated that approximately 65% of young people transitioning from care do not have, or do not know of, a 'plan' – that is, no leaving care or transition plan meaning no plan for their future.

In an effort to identify why inordinate numbers of young people leave care with no formal plan, CREATE surmised in its report, *What's the Answer? Young people's **solutions** for improving transitioning to independence from out of home care* (CREATE, 2010), that:

> While governments insist that Plans do exist … Planning is breaking down. Possibly caseworkers are lazy or are unaware of their responsibilities in these areas; this is highly unlikely, given the motivation required to work within human services and the legislative framework in which they operate. It is much more likely that if shortcuts are taken it is because of the need to set priorities (acute cases entering the system receiving most attention) because of unrealistic caseloads. Also, large numbers of unallocated cases (eg. see data provided in a Report by the Ombudsman, Victoria, 2009) make it unclear who would take responsibility for transition planning for such a young person. (p.7)

CREATE notes on the website of the Children, Youth and Families Division (DHS, 2010) that it is the Department of Human Services and CSOs who hold case management responsibility and, as such, must ensure that all young people leaving care have a completed transition plan.

Therefore, CREATE strongly recommends that the Victorian Government, as the corporate parent, establish a more rigorous system of monitoring and compliance for those with case management responsibility, thereby ensuring that all young people possess a formal, documented transition plan upon leaving care.

In this section on planning for transition, CREATE would draw your attention to a number of additional issues identified from the substantial body of research that CREATE has undertaken with young people[1] and which CREATE would suggest be considered by the Victorian Government when reviewing the process of planning for transition.

The leaving care or transition plan

Firstly, young people consider that their leaving care or transition plans should be 'user friendly' in that:

- the content is seen as useful as it addresses the needs deemed central to the transition process
- the format and language used can be easily understood.

Secondly, for young people, transitioning from care to independence aligns with the three-phased process, identified by Maunders et al. (1999) as:

- planning to transition from care – the preparation phase
- leaving care and getting established – the transition phase
- gaining independence - the after-care phase.

Within each phase, young people identified the following areas or domains as the major considerations that need to be the central reference points in each phase of transitioning, if the transition process is going to be navigated 'smoothly', or as seamlessly as possible:

- planning
- housing
- education and training
- employment
- financial security
- social relationships and support networks (which includes family relationships w hen appropriate)
- health (physical, emotional, mental, and sexual)
- life skills.

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[1] CREATE has captured the views and opinion of 721 young people with a care experience through the following research activities which addressed transitioning from out-of-care to independence:

- Project 1. 2009: *Create Report Card 2009 – Transitioning from Care: Tracking Progress*
  - STILL IN CARE Young People's Survey (15-18 years of age) – 275 respondents
  - LEFT CARE Young People's Survey (25 years maximum age) – 196 respondents
- Project 2. 2010: What's the Answer? Young people's **solutions** for improving transitioning to independence from out of home care
  - Initial Consultations (i): CREATE Youth Advisory Group (YAG) Focus Groups – 27 young people
  - Initial Consultations (ii): One-to-One Interviews with a young person representing special interest groups – 5 young people
  - NYAC Forum: One-day consultation forum with delegates drawn from CREATE's National Youth Advisory Council (NYAC) – 10 delegates
- Project 3. 2010-11: 'What's the Plan?' Campaign
  - Young People's (over 15 years) Baseline Survey – 208 respondents

Phase 2 has been completed and the views of the 610 young people, aged 15-18 years, preparing to transition, have been captured. The findings will be reported in the 2011 Report Card due for release on 23 May 2011.

CREATE would suggest that these domains are compatible with, and can be drawn easily from, the Looking After Children (LAC) Framework used in Victoria to underpin case management. As such, CREATE would propose that the domains identified by young people as relevant form the basis of a leaving care or transition plan. As McDowall (2008:31) points out, domains are "... essential aspects of the individual young person's life that need to be functional to effect a successful transition."

Furthermore, given that planning is a significant component in the preparation phase of transition (Phase 1), especially the development of a leaving care or transition plan, young people consider that not only 'planning' *per se* but their <u>active involvement</u> in the planning process is not only essential in the preparation phase, but is an on-going necessity in the both the transition phase and after care phase, as it:

- encourages a young person's ownership, hence valuing, of his/her leaving care or transition plan
- facilitates a process of on-going monitoring and regular review and modification of existing plans to reflect changing individual circumstances, needs, aspirations and goals which, in turn, ensures the currency, hence relevancy, of the young person's plan is maintained.

CREATE strongly recommends that policies and procedures related to transitioning from care:

- require that a consistent approach to developing a leaving care or transition plan is adopted by using:
  – a standard template which has as its basis the areas/domains identified by young people as central reference points
  – a format and language which young people consider 'user friendly'
- require that a young person be actively involved in the development of his/her leaving care or transition plan
- incorporate a monitoring and review process to ensure that each young person's leaving care or transition plan is reviewed and updated on a regular basis, at least annually.

'Identity' records

Another critical requirement that young people identified as integral to planning effectively to transition from care is the obtaining of official and personal documentation and/or records, 'free-of-charge'. For many, they:

- do not know 'what' documentation they are entitled to receive, or even need
- do not know 'where to go' to obtain the information/documentation
- are given 'the run around' when they apply through the 'right' channels
- can ill afford the cost of obtaining some documentation.

A significant source of frustration for many young people is the 'eligibility barrier' that a lack of official documentation or 'ID' imposes on them. At a time when they are dealing with a number of significant issues as they transition from care to independence, the increased burden of needing to obtain essential documentation could have been avoided by the provision of all pertinent documentation prior to their transitioning.

As such, CREATE strongly recommends that every young person leaving care be provided with any personal material held by respective government departments, agencies or persons responsible for the provision of care for the child under a placement arrangement, free of charge. This includes all documents ranging from birth certificates and passports to school reports and photographs.

Checklist and exit interview

Additional suggestions made by young people to support planning for transition related to the assessment of a young person's preparedness to leave care and to ascertain and confirm that all necessary supports have been identified and organised using:

▪ a checklist of actions for the case manager
▪ an exit interview, including a health check.

Firstly, CREATE considers that the need for a case manger to complete a checklist of actions that need to be undertaken prior to a young person leaving care is pivotal in assisting and supporting a young person to gain the capacity to make the transition to independent living.

Secondly, CREATE suggests that an exit interview with a young person leaving care is a useful means for guiding leaving care practice. Gathering information from young people leaving care can help staff to improve service delivery and identify problem areas while providing young people with an opportunity to transfer useful insights and experiences and feel valued by the process.

CREATE has noted that the Department of Human Services has developed a checklist for case planners and managers entitled *Things that matter when [planning for a young person transitioning from care* (DHA, 2010) and commends the Department on the development of such a critical tool.

CREATE also noted the detailed checklist developed for carers and highly recommends that such a checklist be developed for young people themselves to assist them to:

▪ develop their own understanding of the 'areas' that need to be addressed in order to establish and maintain independence
▪ evaluate their own level of preparedness to transition from care, identifying specific areas that require further development in terms of knowledge and/or skills
▪ identify the kinds of support services that are available and determine those services that will assist them to achieve self-sufficiency when establishing independence.

CREATE strongly recommends that policies and procedures related to transitioning from care stipulate that a checklist and exit interview (including a health check) form an essential part of an enforced compliance procedure to ensure that ALL young people are afforded maximum preparation before exiting their care placement and that the necessary kinds and levels of on-going support required to establish and maintain independence have not only been identified but organised as well.

(iii)   the delivery approach to support services does not provide seamless provision

To ensure that young people are placed on a continuum of care as they make a gradual transition from care to increasing independence, CREATE considers that the delivery approach to support services should be based on the Maunders et al. (1999) model of the three-phased process of transition. The efficacy of such a model to provide systemic and seamless delivery of services to young people transitioning to independence would be enhanced significantly if a more systematic approach to the identification of services and supports was taken.

Firstly, CREATE suggests that identifying the types and levels of support provision across the transition phases using the eight domains identified by young people, will facilitate a continuum of care aligned with a process of gradual transition (see the listing in the previous section under the sub-heading "The leaving care or transition plan", p.8).

Secondly, CREATE suggests that the characteristics of young people with a care background need to be recognised, considered and addressed in the development of any systemic model designed to provide the appropriate services and supports required by young people, collectively or individually, as they transition from care to independence.

Further to those characteristics identified by McDowall (2009) as listed previously in section (i), p.5, research conducted by Tweedle (2007) and Stein (2008) provide further delineation of the characteristics of young people.

When compared with their peers in the general population, Tweedle (2007) identified that young people transitioning from care to independence are more likely to be:

- undereducated (have not completed high school)
- unemployed or underemployed
- earning lower wages (if employed)
- parents at a younger age
- incarcerated or involved with the criminal justice system
- homeless at some stage of their lives
- living in unstable housing arrangements
- dependent on social assistance
- experiencing mental health issues
- without medical insurance (in the US)
- at a higher risk of substance abuse.

Stein (2008) identified the following three different outcome groups, emphasising that each would require different types and amounts of support during and after transition:

- Moving on
- Survivors
- Strugglers.

"Moving on" included those young people who "welcomed the challenge of living independently and gaining more control over their lives" (p. 300). These young people made effective use of the help they had been offered and kept positive links with carers and some family members.

The "Survivors", tended to include younger care leavers who had experienced disrupted placements and more movement after exiting, often related to homelessness and unemployment. They benefitted most from assistance from specialist caseworkers and mentors.

His most disadvantaged group, the "Strugglers", experienced the classic difficulties associated with care leavers and required most after-care support. Their needs should not be overlooked even though they seem to benefit least from this assistance.

It is CREATE's opinion that refining the proposed three-phased model to include the same areas or domains within and across all three phases of transitioning, and utilising the findings of researchers in the field to define the most appropriate types and levels of supports required by young people as they navigate each transition phase will:

- facilitate a more systematic or methodical approach being afforded each phase, including monitoring and review processes, thus avoiding an arbitrary or *ad hoc* approach to the identification of supports required, at both the systemic and individual levels
- provide a more comprehensive continuum of care and support that young people with a care experience, collectively and/or individually, require as they transition from out-of-home care to independence.

Young people in-care and post-care live the experience and have a great deal of wisdom and information about what they think and what they need in terms of support and assistance before, during and after transitioning from care. In *What's the Answer? Young people's solutions for improving transitioning to independence from out of home care* (CREATE, 2010), a comprehensive 'listing' of support services for each phase of transition as identified by young people with a care experience who have participated in CREATE's research activities is made. For ease of reference, this listing is provided as Attachment A (pp.21-29).

(iv) awareness and availability of support services and referrals is inconsistent and insufficient

There is a range of existing programs and services for young people leaving care, both in the preparation and post care stages including leaving care programs, living skills assessments and group work programs.

Feedback from young people however indicates that the availability of services and information is inconsistent and insufficient. Resources and information aimed at supporting and preparing young people transitioning from care to function as independent adults in the community are critical to ensuring this vulnerable cohort are able to seek supports and services as and when required.

CREATE recommends that all young people have information and resources available to them in a way that is similar to those developed and used in other states such as the *Go Your Own Way* kits in Queensland. These kits, a joint partnership project between CREATE and the Department of Communities, are distributed to all young people aged 17 years and contain resources to help young people answer common questions about independent living and also practical tools to help them support themselves. The kits are designed for use in discussions between young people and workers to review the progress of each young person's leaving care planning.

3.5.3 What more might need to be done to meet the needs and improve the outcomes of children in out-of-home care and those leaving care regarding:

- **Their education, health and mental health needs;**
- **The needs of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and**
- **Arrangements for developmentally appropriate contact between a child in out-of-home care and members of his or her family?**

(i) Education, health and mental health needs

Young people, themselves, have identified what more needs to be done to meet the needs and improve the outcomes of children and young people in out-of-home care and those leaving care (CREATE, 2010).

Education and training

Issues	Solutions
Preparation Phase ■ Teachers are not trained to understand the impact that abuse and neglect have on young people with a care experience. ■ Young people in care have a higher rate of suspension or expulsion from school than the general population. ■ Education support plans are often not developed, and when they are they may not be effective.	■ Review training for teachers focussing on understanding and managing the impact of abuse (on behaviour) for young people in care in educational settings. ■ Review Educational Support Plans to ensure they are effective <u>and</u> implemented for all young people in care.

Education and training (cont.)

Issues	Solutions
- Young people's academic results are lower than those of young people in the general population. - Lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities within CP Departments and Education Departments means young people fall through the cracks. - Child Protection orders finishing whilst a young person is completing his/her senior certificate, or turning 18 during the semester, and the young person's schooling is interrupted if they have to leave their care placement. Many young people are unable to finish their schooling as they have to focus on getting accommodation and a job to support themselves. - Lack of stable housing impacts on young people being able to focus and participate fully on their education.	- Develop educational tutor programs for young people with a care experience as an essential part of their educational support plan, not an adjunct to it, reducing lengthy delays in obtaining necessary permissions. - Extend placements for all young people turning 18 during their final year of school until their formal high school education is completed.
Transition Phase - A low rate of young people with a care experience complete high school compared to the general population. The low expectations of government compound this issue, ie. young people in care are expected (and accepted) to have lower educational attainment. - Young people associated with Juvenile Justice often have poor educational outcomes and disrupted schooling. - Life-skills training is an "add-on" rather than being a part of the mainstream educational curriculum. - Early parenthood often prohibits young people completing their education.	- Develop a policy position and set targets so that attainment the proportion of young people in care completing Year 12 will be the same as that for the general population. - Develop alternative education pathways, including training and volunteering opportunities <u>specifically</u> for children and young people with a care experience. - Include life-skills development as part of the mainstream high-school curriculum to develop hands-on practical life skills courses/training for young people. *Best Practice Example: Create Your Future Program*
After Care Phase - Lack of practical information about alternative pathways to get into TAFE and Uni. - Young people are too busy surviving to continue their education post 18 years. - Young people in care often don't have people to support and encourage them to study. - Vocational education programs are difficult to get into, and young people are competing with mainstream students to get places.	- Develop quotas for young people with a care experience in TAFE and universities. Young people should be given priority status as in the model adopted by SA. - Waive HECS fees for young people with a care experience. - Provide automatic tutoring support for young people with a care experience who enter tertiary education.

Health (physical, emotional, mental and sexual)

Issues	Solutions
Preparation Phase ▪ Access to free counselling and mental health support services is difficult, and young people are often "put off" by the prohibitive cost.	▪ Implement an Exit Health Check for young people transitioning from care as part of the planning process.
Transition Phase ▪ Young people lack confidence in accessing health services, and it can be daunting to seek out support when they are unwell. ▪ Young people do not know which doctors will bulk bill. Having to pay upfront for health services is challenging for young people on limited incomes. Public hospitals have lengthy waiting lists and for young people with jobs, or studying this is not a viable option.	▪ Young people could be accompanied when being introduced to services (including doctors, dentists, mental health professionals, Medicare, health care funds, drug and alcohol supports). ▪ Develop a brochure that informs young people about bulk billing surgeries (this information can also be included on the *CREATE Your Future* website and in Leaving Care Kits).
After Care Phase ▪ Services do not understand specific needs of young people post-care ▪ Lack of dedicated transition workers familiar with the total range of support services available	▪ Conduct an annual review of support services available. Any deficits in services should be identified and steps taken to develop necessary resources to meet the unmet need. ▪ Ensure that transition-from-care support workers are adequately trained so that they are familiar with the range of support services available.

(ii) The needs of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) clients and staff and services supporting them have unique needs and operate with many competing complexities. Greater attention needs to be paid to the multitude of issues facing those from diverse cultures.

The following case study (CREATE, 2010:33-34) presents one young person's culturally diverse perspective on issues faced when transitioning from care.

Case Study: A Culturally Diverse Perspective

Background

Helena is a 25 year old female, mother of four who lives in Victoria. She entered care when she was 11 years old, primarily residing in foster care. While in care, Helena became interested in Islam but was discouraged from pursuing her religious interest as she was living with Catholic foster carers at the time. Shortly after exiting care at 18 years of age, Helena converted to Islam. She found her engagement in religion gave her stability which she was lacking upon transitioning from care.

Leaving care planning

No one spoke to Helena about what would happen once her Child Protection Order finished at 18 years, nor did she have a Leaving Care Plan.

Barriers

Helena found that the main barriers to accessing support services were due primarily to lack of information and her faith. Firstly, the lack of information resulted in her not knowing what was available and what she was entitled to. Secondly, as Helena had not been able to test her faith while in care, she had to discover her faith by herself first upon leaving care. She felt that this prevented her from accessing support from religious organisations immediately upon leaving care. Helena also discussed the difficulty of accessing TILA. Although she got together all the required documentation of her care status, received the necessary quotes for equipment and then engaged agency support to assist her application, she received a rejection letter eight weeks later as she was not within 24 months of exiting care – reflecting the recent changes to TILA.

Solutions for government

From her experiences while in care, Helena suggested that there a number of actions that governments could take to better support all young people transitioning from care, in general, as well as for young people from CALD backgrounds, in particular.

- Provide more encouragement and dedicated time for workers to find out the interests and passions of children and young people.
- Have better placement matching for children and young people of varying faiths.
- Develop targeted foster care recruitment strategies for people of different religious persuasions, such as Muslim and Jewish carers, as this will be an issue of even more importance with the emergence of new and emerging refugee populations.
- Link young people in with local community linkages, such a Youth Islamic Centre or local churches, as they are a positive influence and have social support frameworks in place, such as people you can turn to after you've left care.
- Start the planning process earlier.
- Have dedicated workers to support young people after 18 years of age.
- Provide more accommodation options for young people transitioning from care, based on their different needs including transitional housing and share accommodation.
- Provide more support for young people with a care experience who become young mums and dads.
- Make the TILA processes fairer.

(iii) Arrangements for developmentally appropriate contact between a child in out-of-home care and members of his or her family

Contact with family members may not be an option. It needs to be taken into consideration that for some young people, based on their past experiences, they may not consider it 'safe' or 'healthy' to re-establish a relationship with their family or they may simply not want to.

However, the issues/concerns, and suggested solutions, that young people identified in relation to contact with family members (CREATE, 2010) are outlined below.

Social relationships and support networks

Issues	Solutions
Preparation Phase ▪ Lack of planning and support for young people reunifying with birth families. ▪ Young people lack support to develop relationships and connections to their communities. ▪ Providing information about supports and services needs to be more than just words; it needs to be practical and "hands on".	▪ Ensure that, where appropriate, the reunification with selected birth family members commences before a young person turns 18. This could be through a program of gradual visitations.
Transition Phase ▪ Young people need supportive adults who care about them in their life, not just peers or paid workers. ▪ Young people need to be connected to each other and their community.	▪ Establish mentoring programs for young people transitioning from care. ▪ Support connection experiences (eg. *clubCREATE* which all young people with a care experience are eligible to join) to link young people in care with each other and their community.
After Care Phase ▪ Young people have limited access to adults in their lives to guide them once they have left care; this is very important especially when things go wrong.	▪ Ensure that young people are connected with members of their cultural and/or social community while in care through interactions supervised by transition-from-care workers and engagement with mentoring programs. With such relationships established, young people would have an additional layer of continuing support after leaving care.

3.5.4 How can the views of children and young people best inform decisions about their care? How can the views of those caring for children best inform decisions affecting the wellbeing of children in their care?

All key stakeholders in the service system need to work together in the best interests of children, young people and their families. Children and young people are central to the assessment and intervention process and key relationships are required in supporting children and young people through trauma towards well-being. The participation of young people in shaping their futures is central and a vital component of them being empowered and it is the responsibility of all participants in the out-of-home care system to ensure opportunities are provided for the voices of children and young people to be heard.

CREATE advocates that strategies that facilitate and enable children and young people to express their views and provide input into and feedback on decisions about their care, both on an individual and systemic level are encouraged and supported.

CREATE is concerned about the mechanism for the voices of young people to be heard. We note that the Ombudsman's recommendations included direct feedback mechanisms. CREATE has made submission to the Department of Human Services to fund the continuance of the CREATE **Be.Heard Program** piloted by the Victorian Child Safety Commissioner. The Ombudsman Report (2010) stated the following:

> The surveys recently conducted by the CREATE Foundation and the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner are a positive step and have the potential to benefit the *out of home care* system on a number of levels. Such processes provide for additional scrutiny and serve the crucial function of allowing the children for whom the system exists to provide direct feedback and contribute to system improvement. I consider that the approach of regularly surveying children in *out of home care* and publishing survey results which has been adopted by some other jurisdictions should be considered in Victoria. (p.125)

In Queensland, the Children's Commissioner is responsible for the Community Visitor program which plays a vital monitoring role for children and young people. In addition, the Queensland government provides an additional layer of monitoring to ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard by an independent body (ie. CREATE Foundation). The Be.Heard program offers an opportunity for government to seek the views of children and young people by an independent body, and once the information is collected and analysed it is then disseminated to government, and the sector to improve practice and address any issues identified.

CREATE strongly urges the Victorian Government to consider funding this vital program, firstly to provide opportunities for government to hear directly from children and young people, and secondly, to provide an opportunity for workers and regions to gain an insight into the issues experienced in their locality, and to implement changes to improve practice.

8.1 *There is currently a range of oversight processes involved in the child protection and care system (for example, Ministerial/Departmental inquiries into child deaths and serious injuries. Internal organisational complaints procedures, and the statutory roles of the Ombudsman, the Victorian Auditor General, the Child Safety Commissioner and the Coroner).*

In early 2010, the Victorian Law Reform Commission approached CREATE to conduct consultations with young people with an out-of-home care experience. The aim of the consultations was to hear about children and young people's directly experiences with the Children's Court in Victoria.

In addition, the consultations were designed to assist the Victorian Law Reform Commission in examining the current operations of the court and to progress the development of what other models may work in order to better serve children and their families.

Key themes from the consultation indicated that the young people consulted had little idea about court processes and found court a confusing and frustrating experience. Young people stated that they found court less daunting when they knew who their lawyer was and if they trusted the person. Recommendation by CREATE to the Victorian Law Reform Commission included that:

- children and young people attending court have access to an independent person who can explain court processes prior to attending
- children and young people's wishes are appropriately and accurately represented, eg. by an independent court support or advocate
- children under the age of 13 should not attend Family Court proceedings
- courts should ensure children and young people are able to meet with the same lawyer
- ensure young people are able to understand and be part of court process
- make a court room more young person friendly

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Key Findings and Recommendations

What's the Answer? Young people's solutions for improving transitioning from out of home care (CREATE, 2010)

PREPARATION PHASE

ISSUES	SOLUTIONS
Planning	
▪ Young people transitioning from care report that they do not have leaving care/transition plans; 65% have no plan for their future. ▪ Young people are often not involved in the transition planning process. ▪ Young people are often not informed about their transition. *"It was terrible. I was told a week before I turned 18 that I was leaving care."*	▪ Develop a national transition from care planning process in consultation with young people including: 　▫ a Template for a Leaving Care Plan 　▫ a Checklist of actions to be completed before transitioning 　▫ an Exit Care Interview with the young person six months before transitioning. ▪ Employ specialised transition-from-care workers in each region. ▪ Develop a Participation Strategy to engage children and young people in planning. ▪ Adopt a consistent approach to transition planning and commence the process at 15 years of age.
Housing	
▪ Young peoples' capacity and willingness to live independently is not explored fully in the planning process. Young people in the general population now live at home for longer (over 25 years of age). ▪ Housing/accommodation options are not explored early enough in the planning process resulting in limited housing options at the point of transition.	▪ Financially compensate carers to continue to provide support for young people up to age 21 to stay with existing carers if this is the young person's preference. ▪ Develop formal partnerships to determine a suite of housing/accommodation options available for young people with a care experience.
Education	
▪ Teachers are not trained to understand the impact that abuse and neglect have on young people with a care experience. ▪ Young people in care have a higher rate of suspension or expulsion from school than the general population. ▪ Education support plans are often not developed, and when they are they may not be effective. ▪ Young people's academic results are lower than those of young people in the general population. ▪ Lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities within CP Departments and Education Departments means young people fall through the cracks. ▪ Child Protection orders finishing whilst a young person is completing his/her senior certificate, or turning 18 during the semester, and the young person's schooling is interrupted if they have to leave their care placement. Many young people are unable to finish their schooling as they have to focus on getting accommodation and a job to support themselves. ▪ Lack of stable housing impacts on young people being able to focus and participate fully on their education.	▪ Review training for teachers focussing on understanding and managing the impact of abuse (on behaviour) for young people in care in educational settings. ▪ Review Educational Support Plans to ensure they are effective <u>and</u> implemented for all young people in care. ▪ Develop educational tutor programs for young people with a care experience as an essential part of their educational support plan, not an adjunct to it, reducing lengthy delays in obtaining necessary permissions. ▪ Extend placements for all young people turning 18 during their final year of school until their formal high school education is completed.

"Kids would get a better education and get better employment if their placements were more stable"	

Employment

▪ Limited career planning with young people, and a general lack of information about what employment options are available to them.	▪ An essential component to be included in an appropriate Transition from Care Plan.

Financial Security

▪ Young people liaising with Centrelink to access, for example, Youth Allowance are challenged when providing evidence of care status and having ID.	▪ Develop a system that can "flag" young people with a care experience. Workers to receive training/information about the specific challenges and needs of young people in care. Young people would have the right to opt out of this system if they wished.
	▪ Employ dedicated Centrelink workers who are responsible for supporting young people transitioning from care (one in each office at a minimum).
	▪ Provide training for Centrelink workers and fund the development of a video that provides the perspective of young people in the transition process.

Social Relationships and Support Networks

▪ Lack of planning and support for young people reunifying with birth families.	▪ Ensure that, where appropriate, the reunification with selected birth family members commences before a young person turns 18. This could be through a program of gradual visitations.
▪ Young people lack support to develop relationships and connections to their communities.	
▪ Providing information about supports and services needs to be more than just words; it needs to be practical and "hands on".	
"Community contact and support is very important to Indigenous young people"	
"... The interaction between one's self and their community is how a young person grows into a contributing adult"	
"You need to be independent to have confidence to engage with your community"	

Health (Physical, Emotional, Mental, and Sexual)

▪ Access to free counselling and mental health support services is difficult, and young people are often "put off" by the prohibitive cost.	▪ Implement an Exit Health Check for young people transitioning from care as part of the planning process.
"...it should be made that a young person can't leave care if they haven't got supports in place."	

Life Skills

▪ Young people often have frequent placements during their time in care and learning basic life skills is often not a priority.	▪ Provide more life-skills programs, with particular attention to regional areas.
▪ There are varying expectations from caseworkers, carers and young people about what life skills are and when they should be	▪ Review carer training to ensure that specialist courses are developed in life-skill development for young people.

| taught, and by whom.

"Young people transitioning from care need as much support as possible; everything from finding somewhere to live to what to wear to interviews".

"You don't have to start formally planning before 15, but young people should be taught life skills – just like other young people. More life skills training has to happen with carers".

"More mandatory training for foster carers. This training would include how to teach young people life skills, and helping to change the culture of foster care from carers seeing their role as a job, to that of a parent" | |

TRANSITION PHASE

ISSUES	SOLUTIONS
Planning	
▪ Transition planning processes are not often clear to workers. ▪ Information about the transition phase and resources is fragmented and difficult for young people to navigate.	▪ Develop a workforce development strategy to prioritise training for workers in all aspects of the transition-from-care planning process. ▪ Develop a national communication strategy to promote already funded transition-from-care website www.createyourfuture.org.au to young people, workers and carers.
Housing	
▪ Young people are not treated as a priority for subsidised or government housing. ▪ Private rental is challenging as young people are often unable to pay market rates for housing/accommodation. ▪ Government housing for young people is often in low-income, high unemployment areas. *"Rent is really high so more rent assistance would help."*	▪ Implement a priority-housing category for young people with a care experience within public housing, and SAAP services. ▪ Review existing rental subsidies to provide an appropriate level of support to young people to help them access housing in the private rental market. *Best Practice Example: Lead Tenant model (TAS)*
Education	
▪ A low rate of young people with a care experience complete high school compared to the general population. The low expectations of government compound this issue, i.e., young people in care are expected (and accepted) to have lower educational attainment. ▪ Young people associated with Juvenile Justice often have poor educational outcomes and disrupted schooling. ▪ Life-skills training is an "add–on" rather than being a part of the mainstream educational curriculum. ▪ Early parenthood often prohibits young people completing their education.	▪ Develop a policy position and set targets so that attainment the proportion of young people in care completing Year 12 will be the same as that for the general population. ▪ Develop alternative education pathways, including training and volunteering opportunities specifically for children and young people with a care experience. ▪ Include life-skills development as part of the mainstream high-school curriculum to develop hands-on practical life skills courses/training for young people. *Best Practice Example: Create Your Future Program*
Employment	
▪ Young people find it challenging to keep a job when their accommodation, housing, or placements are unstable. ▪ Lack of tailored support to assist young people to be competent and confident in seeking jobs. ▪ No access to records such as birth certificates, and care history, make it difficult for young people to apply for jobs. ▪ Lack of support for young people to guide them to enter the job market. ▪ Cost of clothing and grooming for interviews is prohibitive for some young people.	▪ Enhance the Job Services Network to ensure that its functions meet the specific needs of young care leavers. ▪ Instigate traineeships /internships within various government departments for young people who have been in care, and commit to a quota of placements. ▪ Introduce nationally a model of brokerage funding similar to that operating in Victoria (brokerage is important to provide funds to enable the young care leaver to be competitive in seeking employment, eg. to be well clothed and groomed at interview).
Financial Security	

▪ The TILA process is confusing and difficult to access for young people AND workers AND carers. Young people report that workers often give them the wrong information.
 	
▪ Young people in care report that they have been declined TILA, and have no other options available to assist in their transition to independence.
 	
▪ Funds for TILA ran out before the end of the financial year due to an increase in applications (TILA is not exclusively for young people with a care experience).
 	
▪ Lack of budgeting and financial management skills often lead to poor financial decisions. Advertising that targets the youth market with easy credit and mobile phones exacerbates the situation.
 	
"(TILA) It's confusing and full of jargon...There's a lot of misinformation around...The paperwork is hard"
	▪ Young people need to have access to dedicated transition funds (brokerage) in addition to TILA.
	
	▪ Young people's feedback indicated that a review of TILA might consider the following:
	  ▫ Is the amount of the allowance sufficient to support young people in transition from care?
	  ▫ Is the amount of the budget allocated to TILA sufficient so that all young people under 25 years who have left care are able to access the full allowance?
	  ▫ Is the process of applying for TILA "user friendly" for young care leavers?
	
	▪ Life-skills training needs to incorporate practical financial management.

Social Relationships and Support Networks

▪ Young people need supportive adults who care about them in their life, not just peers or paid workers. ▪ Young people need to be connected to each other and their community.	▪ Establish mentoring programs for young people transitioning from care. ▪ Support connection experiences (eg. *clubCREATE* which all young people with a care experience are eligible to join) to link young people in care with each other and their community.

Health (Physical, Emotional, Mental, and Sexual)

▪ Young people lack confidence in accessing health services, and it can be daunting to seek out support when they are unwell. ▪ Young people do not know which doctors will bulk bill. Having to pay upfront for health services is challenging for young people on limited incomes. Public hospitals have lengthy waiting lists and for young people with jobs, or studying this is not a viable option. *"There are a decreasing number of health services that bulk bill- particularly mental health".* *"Young people are more confident and willing to access a service if a trusted caseworker/carer/mentor attends the service visit with them".*	▪ Young people could be accompanied when being introduced to services (including doctors, dentists, mental health professionals, Medicare, health care funds, drug and alcohol supports). ▪ Develop a brochure that informs young people about bulk billing surgeries (this information can also be included on the *CREATE Your Future* website and in Leaving Care Kits).

Life Skills

▪ There are limited programs that help young people to develop life skills, and they are difficult for young people to access (as many run in school/work hours). ▪ Life skill training and development programs are delivered in a fragmented manner and are often metropolitan based. ▪ Established mentoring programs are often not	▪ Offer life-skills programs in flexible delivery modes (i.e. week-ends and after hours) so that programs are responsive to young peoples' needs. ▪ Map existing life-skills training and development programs that offer specialist training for young people with a care experience and ensure that strategies are in place to distribute the information to NGO's, Centrelink and young people with a care experience. ▪ Continue to support the national *CREATE Your Future* training

specifically developed for young people in care or transitioning from care. Those that are, are rare and offer few places.

"The basics need to start with foster carers, just like other young people learning skills at home. This would include opening a bank account, cooking, cleaning."

package, website, grant-scheme and carer training package. It is important not to duplicate programs and services, and to work toward an integrated system offering economies of scale.

- Implement mentoring programs that are specifically developed to support young people with a care experience, and provide high levels of training and support to community mentors.

Best Practice Example: Create Your Future Program

AFTER CARE INDEPENDENCE PHASE

ISSUES	SOLUTIONS
Planning	
▪ Young people often leave care with no plan for their future and have limited support systems when things go wrong in their lives. ▪ Young people leave care in an ad hoc manner not in a planned way.	▪ Provide "Leaving Care Kits" for all young people leaving care. Note. Before the kits are distributed a "checklist" could be completed relating to the young person's readiness to transition, ie. do they have a plan, do they have a place to live, do they have the necessary life skills, do they have ID and so forth. Once the form is completed in consultation with the young person it should be forwarded to a central point so that a Leaving Care Kit can be dispatched. The kits should contain state-based information about services, entitlements, and link young people to additional resources such as the *CREATE Your Future* website (already funded by the Commonwealth). ▪ Conduct an audit of this process annually. *Best Practice Example: QLD "Go Your Own Way" Leaving Care Kit*
Housing	
▪ Young people are often not equipped to live independently. ▪ High rates of homelessness. ▪ Lack of suitable long-term accommodation. ▪ Young people often leave care and move into temporary or crisis-type accommodation (refuges).	▪ Develop life-skills courses, and / or utilise the *CREATE Your Future* life-skills programs. These should be part of the transition planning process before exiting care. ▪ Develop policy to prevent young care leavers from exiting into short-term emergency or refuge type accommodation. Accommodation should be long-term and stable.
Education	
▪ Lack of practical information about alternative pathways to get into TAFE and Uni. ▪ Young people are too busy surviving to continue their education post 18 years. ▪ Young people in care often don't have people to support and encourage them to study. ▪ Vocational education programs are difficult to get into, and young people are competing with mainstream students to get places. *"I would like to do TAFE but I don't have money or transport to get there".*	▪ Develop quotas for young people with a care experience in TAFE and universities. Young people should be given priority status as in the model adopted by SA. ▪ Waive HECS fees for young people with a care experience. ▪ Provide automatic tutoring support for young people with a care experience who enter tertiary education.
Employment	
▪ High rates of unemployment amongst young people with a care experience. ▪ Lack of training/course options that are tailored to meet young people with a care experience needs. ▪ Information and training about how to get a job and keep it and develop the skills to do so are hard to locate.	▪ Prioritise strategies (and set acceptable targets) to reduce the number of young people with a care experience who are unemployed. ▪ Monitor outcomes and report progress in reducing unemployment.

Financial Security

▪ High level of dependence on financial support from the Government – public housing, mental health services, juvenile justice, income support/allowances.	▪ Take action to reduce unemployment in the care leaving cohort to reduce financial dependence.

Social Relationships and Support Networks

▪ Young people have limited access to adults in their lives to guide them once they have left care; this is very important especially when things go wrong. *"A successful transition is being linked into community where the young person is from ..."*	▪ Ensure that young people are connected with members of their cultural and/or social community while in care through interactions supervised by transition-from-care workers and engagement with mentoring programs. With such relationships established, young people would have an additional layer of continuing support after leaving care.

Health (Physical, Emotional, Mental, and Sexual)

▪ Services do not understand specific needs of young people post-care ▪ Lack of dedicated transition workers familiar with the total range of support services available	▪ Conduct an annual review of support services available in the various regions. Any deficits in services should be identified and steps taken to develop necessary resources to meet the unmet need. ▪ Ensure that transition-from-care support workers are adequately trained so that they are familiar with the range of support services available.

Life Skills

▪ Young people often find it stressful when they are out of the "system" as they have no one to turn to when they need advice or guidance and things "go wrong". ▪ Many young people are unable to achieve successful independent living, and find it hard to maintain a job, have stable housing/accommodation, budget and take care of themselves. ▪ Young people's trajectory to be welfare dependent and unemployed is affected by the system's inability to prepare them for adulthood (which is also affected by the fact that governments in many states expect them to be self-sufficient at the age of 18).	▪ When reviewing the suite of support services available for care leavers, make sure they provide a variable range of approaches, realising that one size will not fit all the young people who come from different cultural backgrounds, have varied skills and abilities, and have divergent aspirations. However, with a combination of diverse mentoring and community programs in place, it is imperative that mechanisms for coordinating service delivery exist. *Best Practice Example: Rapid Response System, SA*