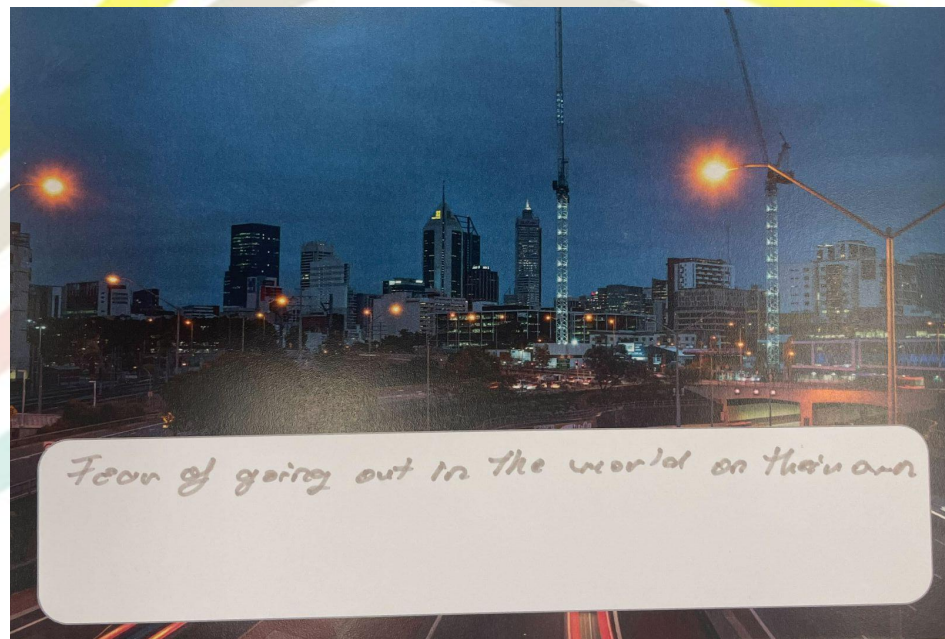


# *Mapping leaving care services in Western Australia*

Final Project Report  
Department of Communities

23 June, 2023



*"Fear of going out in the world on their own".  
Project stakeholder on the hopes and fears of young people leaving care.*

**This report was produced on the lands of the Whadjuk Noongar, Menang Noongar, Kariyarra, Ngarluma, Nyiyaparli and Martu Peoples. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands and their Elders past and present.**

**Throughout the project, people with lived experience of the out of home care system have shared experiences, views and aspirations. We honour and thank you for trusting us with them.**

## About this report

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This document is the result of work commissioned by the Department of Communities (the Department) regarding the current landscape of services for young people as they transition from care into independent and interdependent living.

This report contains findings of the work done by Innovation Unit, in partnership with many Department and sector representatives, as well as young people with lived experience of being in care.

It also includes:

- Journey maps for specific cohorts of young people, highlighting how the journey through leaving care differs for different groups
- Service blueprints, highlighting the main services being delivered for care leavers in the locations this report covers (Perth metro area, the Pilbara and the Great Southern)
- The output of a jurisdictional scan, with learnings from other jurisdictions regarding leaving care

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# **Project background**



# Project Aims and Objectives

## Project background

In November 2021, Anglicare WA released the Home Stretch WA Trial Report 2021, which recommended that work be undertaken to explore and map the experience of young people transitioning from care to adulthood from a whole-of-system perspective, to inform how the Home Stretch WA service offer could be integrated seamlessly into the system of services available to young people leaving care in Western Australia.

Following this recommendation, this project, commissioned by the Department, consists of mapping the continuum of care for young people leaving the out-of-home care system in Western Australia and the experiences of young people with different characteristics through these services, through engagement with key stakeholders (including service providers and young care leavers). The goal is to provide insights into how Home Stretch WA will integrate into the existing system.

## Project objectives

This project particularly seeks to understand:

- How leaving care services are currently delivered across child protection districts, geographical regions, and types of agencies (e.g., internally delivered supports and external funded supports).
- What the experiences of young people leaving care look like and how they differ depending on young people's specific needs, care arrangements, and locations (e.g., metropolitan vs remote areas). This will include journey mapping and exploring how young people currently access support across Western Australia.
- How leaving care approaches across Australian and relevant international jurisdictions can inform Western Australia's approach to ensure its leaving care system is well integrated to meet the needs of young people.

## Relation to previous reports

There have been several previous reports on the services and supports provided for young people leaving care, including the Western Australian Auditor General's report (2018-19), *Young People Leaving Care*. Substantial published and unpublished research has examined how well leaving care services are supporting young people, and where the opportunities to improve lie (e.g. A New Direction Home: The future of leaving care (Parity February 2021; Home Stretch WA Trial Report 2021).

This report builds on and supports many of the findings and recommendations of these reports. In addition, it specifically considers:

- What happens for young people as a result of different experiences with leaving care - in terms of how individual people's lives can be affected by their experiences as they prepare for and then leave care;
- How young people from different groups or with different characteristics report being affected differently by leaving care, and the different things young people from different groups and/or in different regions of WA might require from a leaving care system;
- How leaving care intersects with services and supports for young people who are still in care, and those in post care, and the changes that might be suggested in these services that would enable services in the leaving care landscape to work most effectively; and
- How the introduction of Home Stretch WA will affect the landscape, and changes that are recommended so that it can be as effective as possible.

# Project approach

This project has used a qualitative approach to understand the different experiences of young people who leave care in Western Australia and how they are supported through this transition, depending on their needs and where they live.

Our project aims to highlight where things are working well and where there are gaps. We have also identified things working well in other jurisdictions that offer lessons for Western Australia. Things that are working, here or elsewhere, are highlighted as 'bright pockets of practice'.

To gain the insights and findings in this report, we engaged with service providers, sector stakeholders, and young people with lived experience of leaving care across Western Australia.

This extensive engagement helped us to formulate insights about the strengths and weaknesses of the current leaving care system, which have guided our recommendations as to how Home Stretch WA and the existing system can integrate to best support young people who leave care in their transition into adulthood.

Our recommendations are further informed by learnings from a jurisdictional scan which documents leaving care approaches across Australian and relevant international jurisdictions.

This report was written with the assumption that Home Stretch WA will be continued. The recommendations made are complementary to the delivery of Home Stretch WA across the State, and aim to support its effectiveness.

## A stepped engagement approach

We used the following 4-step engagement approach to build our understanding of current practices within the leaving care system:

- Service mapping workshops with service providers and sector stakeholders to map existing services for young people leaving care and groups of young people with specific needs
- Journey mapping group interviews with service providers to map in detail the journeys of groups of young people with specific needs
- Micro-focus groups or interviews with young people with lived experience to document their journeys, mapping support received and challenges faced
- Additional micro-focus groups and interviews with targeted service providers and sector stakeholders to fill gaps in information gathered.

Although desktop research gave us an overview of the leaving care system and key policies in place to support young people, meeting with practitioners and young people with lived experience gave us access to a unique knowledge of current practice and accumulated insights from prior experience that we have documented in this report. This was crucial to understanding the nuances between theory and practices in the leaving care system.

## Geographical areas chosen for this project

We undertook consultation in the Perth Metropolitan area, the Great Southern, and the Pilbara, to gain an understanding of similarities and differences of the leaving care system across regions with vastly different contexts.

## The team

The Innovation Unit project team led the project engagement, working closely with the Department and local District Offices in regions to broker relationships with stakeholders, and with service providers to engage with young people with lived experience.

# The leaving care landscape - by type of provider

The leaving care ecosystem includes a variety of stakeholders, ranging from services dedicated to leaving care to general services that young people leaving care will access. The objective of our project is to understand young people's journeys as they navigate this ecosystem, and make recommendations as to how Home Stretch WA and this existing system can integrate to best support young people as they leave care and become adults.

*\*This diagram is not exhaustive of all services available to young people but represents the main supports accessed by young people who leave care as described to us by service providers and young people themselves.*

## Department of Communities

District Office teams  
 Post-care funding requests approved by District Directors  
 Specialist roles within District Office teams: Psychologists, Education Officers, NDIS officers.  
 Advocate for Children in Care  
 Funds Leaving Care Services (LCS) and other community service agency providers.  
 Provides Public Housing.

The Department is responsible for providing for the practical, financial and social needs of children in care up to the age of 18. For children aged 15-18 who are in the process of leaving care, their responsibilities include practical and financial support, referrals to other agencies, and personal advice and guidance, while a wide range of post care supports are to be available for children who have left care until the age of 25. The Department's responsibilities and how they are to be met are set out in the Casework Practice Manual, with further details provided overleaf.

## Leaving Care Services

Wanslea, My Place  
 Salvation Army, TSS  
 Mission Australia, Navig8

## Home Stretch

Wanslea,  
 Salvation Army,  
 Mission Australia,  
 Yorganop and others

## Natural networks

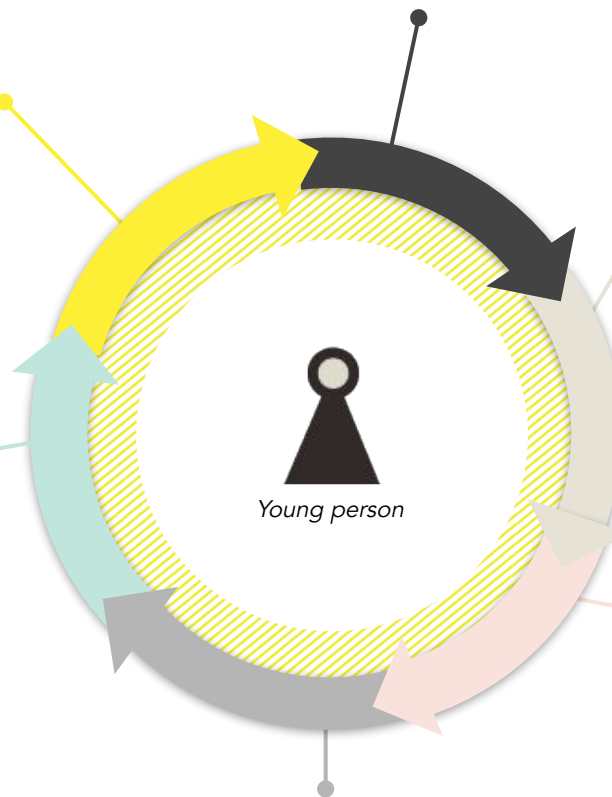
Biological parents  
 Extended family of origin, including kinship carers  
 Community, including Elders  
 Foster carers (current or previous)  
 Trusted adults (e.g., teachers, sports coaches, friend or partner's parents)  
 Friends

## Targeted services, including for vulnerable and at risk young people

Youth centres / drop ins  
 Mental health services (e.g., counselling, CAMHS, Headspace, Adult Mental Health)  
 Housing services (e.g., emergency housing, supported accommodation)  
 Financial counselling services  
 Family and Domestic Violence support  
 Drug & alcohol support services  
 Services for specific groups of young people (e.g., youth justice, young parents)  
 Services for Aboriginal young people (e.g., health, recreation), including ACCOs

## Mainstream services, including other Government agencies

Schools  
 Hospitals  
 GPs  
 Housing  
 Centrelink  
 Employment providers  
 NDIS



# The current leaving care landscape - by age

The intention of the leaving care landscape is to provide a variety of supports to young people at different ages. The following provides a non-exhaustive summary of current obligations and responsibilities of the Department with regard to care leavers. The information below was informed by the Department's Casework Practice Manual (CPM).

## Phase 1: Preparation

A young person's Care Plan must incorporate a leaving care plan (LCP) following the first review held after they reach 15 years of age.

The focus in this stage is on education and life skills development, with LCPs expected to:

- Identify the needs of the young person in preparing to leave care and transition to other living arrangements; and
- Outline steps or measures to be taken to assist the young person to meet those needs.

The Department funds three community sector organisations to prepare young people to transition out of care, from the ages of 15-17. Young people are to be referred to a leaving care service 'at the earliest opportunity to accommodate for associated waitlist times'. The referral should be based on young people's consent and their decision is to be respected but young people should be given the opportunity to be referred at any point in their transition to adulthood.

## Phase 2: Transition to independence

Should commence prior to a young person reaching 17 years, and focus on accommodation and preparing post-care support.

The phase is expected to:

- Help young people plan for any services that don't transition through into adulthood;
- Apply for course or training and make decisions about on-going education;
- Build on life skills developed in Phase 1

Special considerations apply for young people with a disability or challenges for safe, independent living.

## Phase 3: Post care

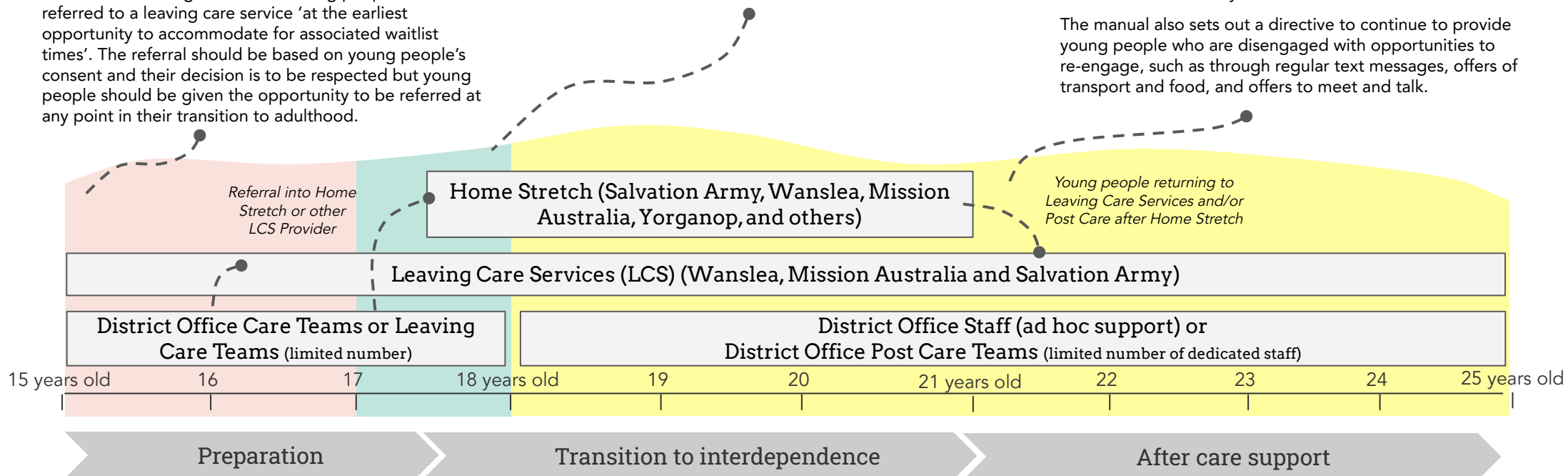
Young people who have left care can see aftercare assistance from the Department at any time until the age of 25. They are not required to go to the district office that managed their case when they were in care.

They are to be provided with a range of assistance including through advice, referral and support.

The manual notes that post-care needs should be responded to "with flexibility and empathy" and that items or support services do not need to be included in their leaving care plan to be provided to young people.

Prior to leaving care they are to be provided with information regarding the assistance that may or must be provided to them, in a manner they can understand.

The manual also sets out a directive to continue to provide young people who are disengaged with opportunities to re-engage, such as through regular text messages, offers of transport and food, and offers to meet and talk.



The background is a solid bright yellow color. Overlaid on this are several thick, white, wavy lines that flow horizontally across the page, creating a sense of movement and depth. The lines are layered, with some appearing in front of others.

# **Exploring young people's journeys out of care**

# What we learned about transitions out of care

What we learned about the experiences of different groups of young people leaving care as we engaged with young people and those supporting them to map their journeys.

## ***Effective leaving and post care support can be the difference between being well-placed for adulthood and ending up in a deeply challenging situation.***

Young people from a range of different backgrounds described various successes and challenges in their lives.

They also describe the impact of how their leaving care transition was handled on their current-day circumstances in ways that tended to cut across other characteristics - such as region or ethnicity.

Three specific types of journeys out of care emerged:

- Journey 1: "Planned success": Where there was an effective, coordinated, and planned transition out of care, and where young people were given supports and guidance in line with the Department's responsibilities, young people spoke of being well positioned to move forward as independent young adults.
- Journey 2: "Unplanned success": There were a group of care leavers who received little or no support to transition out of care, but who succeeded regardless, through their personal resilience and efforts.
- Journey 3: "Major unaddressed challenges": There were a group of care leavers who received little or no support to transition out of care, but who, despite their own efforts and resilience, are not well placed to do well. These young people are in significant need of help right now.

The key moments that differentiated Journey 1 - "Planned success" and Journey 3 - "Major Unaddressed challenges" are outlined on page 20.

*"We're spending the money anyway - but at the back end. Why not spend it upfront in avoiding the problem?"*  
- Agency stakeholder

## ***There are certain characteristics that are associated with specific leaving care experiences.***

Every care leaver has a unique combination of goals, strengths, resources, as well as things they want help with.

Journey mapping for this project identified seven characteristics that affected leaving care experiences. These are:

- Being an Aboriginal young person - due to the intergenerational history of many Aboriginal people with child protection and removal, the level of systemic racism and discrimination Aboriginal people face, and the complex issues affecting Aboriginal families and communities.
- Having Justice involvement - which can both result from, and contribute to, a more complex transition out of care.
- Being eligible for the NDIS - due to the requirements to manage the involvement of the NDIS as well as other services, as well as the risk of having a disability used as an excuse for loss of autonomy and independence.
- Being from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background - due to the impact of systemic racism and discrimination, and the additional challenges young people who have been raised outside birth culture have in understanding and creating their identity.
- Living in a regional or remote area - where services can be less available, less diverse, and where staffing challenges are more acute.
- Being a young parent - which gives rise to additional stresses because of the fear that their own child may be taken.
- Being highly disengaged and isolated - a group of young people who have received very little attention from workers and others (e.g. teachers) throughout a placement emerging at the point of leaving care planning with a range of unidentified and unaddressed needs.

We have provided maps - or depictions - of the major differences that young people in these groups told us about on pages 12-19.

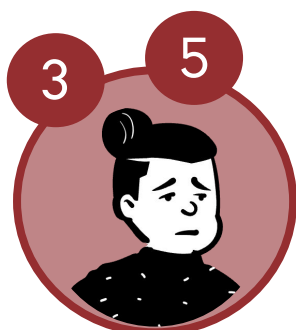


# What's a journey map?

Journey mapping helps us understand how young people with different characteristics experience a similar set of circumstances, in this case the transition out of care. In this case, seven cohorts, or groups with some common elements relating to leaving care, were identified:

1. **Being an Aboriginal young person** - due to the intergenerational history of many Aboriginal people with child protection and removal, the level of systemic racism and discrimination Aboriginal people face, and the complex issues affecting Aboriginal families and communities.
2. **Having justice involvement** - which can both result from, and contribute to, a more complex transition out of care.
3. **Being eligible for the NDIS** - due to the requirements to manage the involvement of the NDIS as well as other services, as well as the risk of having a disability used as an excuse for loss of autonomy and independence.
4. **Being from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background** - due to the impact of systemic racism and discrimination, and the additional challenges young people who have been raised outside birth culture have in understanding and creating their identity.
5. **Living in a regional or remote area** - where services can be less available, less diverse, and where staffing challenges are more acute.
6. **Being a young parent** - which gives rise to additional stresses because of the fear that their own child may be taken.
7. **Being highly disengaged and isolated** - a group of young people who have received very little attention from workers and others (e.g. teachers) throughout a placement emerging at the point of LCP with a range of unidentified and unaddressed needs.

Eight journeys are described here, using the things young people told us to create maps of how young people with these characteristics experience leaving care. Most of the journeys feature more than one critical issue that is affecting someone's transition to adulthood, and in this way they are fictionalised by life-like descriptions of the complex situations real young people are in.



Ash



Dylan



Leila



Kirra



Sam



Jada



Jeremiah



Greg



**Kirra**

is a young Yamatji woman who likes basketball and reading. She was living in care in the Perth metropolitan area.

Kirra's journey is one that highlights some of the issues that particularly affect Aboriginal people.

- This includes the experience of being removed from culture and Country - continuing intergenerational removal in many cases.
- It also highlights how so many steps in an Aboriginal person's journey are delivered without cultural understanding, and are therefore experienced as culturally unsafe - from the way that child safety is assessed, the kinds of supports that are offered, and the cultural appropriateness of some mainstream agencies and places.
- By the time Kirra comes to leave care, she has not been given what she needs to reconnect with her family, culture and community, and ends up trying to find housing and support in an already stretched and culturally unsafe system.
- Kirra's journey highlights the need for Aboriginal people to be involved as workers and supports throughout the process - from assessing child safety, to supporting young people while in care to maintain connection to family and culture, to helping Aboriginal care leavers navigate a return to Country.

"The 'need for speed' - leads to children being placed quickly rather than going the network to find an appropriate place" - Agency worker

I used to get scared when Mum's boyfriend would come round. He never hurt me, but he used to beat up Mum. One day, a woman from Perth came and told me I couldn't stay there. I asked if I could stay in Geraldton with my mum but she said I couldn't - even though she couldn't really say why. Apparently they couldn't find anyone else I could live with so I had to move to a group home in Perth.

I was upset with everything that had happened back home, and everything about the group home was so different to what I knew. The staff there weren't Aboriginal, there was so much they didn't understand. They said pretty racist things. They did it so often. I don't even know if they realised how bad it was. But it made me feel hurt and angry.

"We need to uphold the bar" with young people, someone that that it's an to talk about this." - Youth worker

The case worker kept saying I could see the psychologist to talk about things but when I tried it once, they kept taking notes and I started to get scared - if I said something bad would my family be in trouble? So I just kept things to myself and bottled it up.

They gave me a youth worker a couple of months before I turned 18 to help me set things up for myself, like housing and stuff. It was real hard trusting them at the beginning because I'd learned to keep things to myself, but she didn't pressure me. She helped go to appointments like Centrelink and took me places where I felt more comfortable to talk, like not in an office.

"I'm nervous about finding a house, paying the rent and things, my youth worker said whenever I come up, we'll support you and help you. That made me feel like okay."

Sorting things out before leaving care was really stressful because I didn't have much time. I knew I had to get out of the group home the day I turned 18 and I didn't know what would happen if I couldn't find anywhere to live. The day I turned 18, I pretty much became homeless. I would have liked to go back to my mum still, but I hadn't spoken to her in years by then. Even the nice youth worker told me there basically wasn't any housing available so I ended up in emergency short-stay accommodation.

The whole situation was a mess to be honest, my youth worker kept saying there were things missing in my file like my ID so we couldn't get on with the important stuff. It was so frustrating having to wait because I just wanted to start working and make some money so I could get myself a proper place. I ended up being offered a job on the mines - my youth worker was so proud of me. But then I couldn't take it, because it took too long to get the ID.

"We're chasing the Department for things that should have been done" - Youth worker

It was pretty tough and lonely to be out there in the world with no family. I just wanted to go back and see them. I hadn't seen my mum in ages but I missed her lots. I had no money to go visit though. My youth worker told me we could maybe get funding from the Department for it. I really didn't want to go back to the Department after everything but my youth worker told me they could help, so I said ok. We first went back to my district office but they never got back to us, so my youth worker said we should try and ask other district offices because some are better than others.

As I was waiting to hear back, we had a death in my family in Geraldton. I went back to the Department to ask for some money to go up there. They said they could give me only \$100 for it, which really wasn't enough for a return trip. The people didn't understand it's so important for us to be at funerals. I felt so sad and so lonely that time.

"You're talking about leaving the wounds of the past but the priority is and comfort, that's not culture" - Agency stakeholder

When I finally managed to go back, it wasn't like I'd imagined. I mean, it was great spending time with my mum but it didn't feel like I belonged. Some words my uncles and aunts used, I didn't even know what they meant. It made me feel isolated all over again. I could run into someone from my family and I wouldn't even know it.

"If I don't belong here and don't belong in Perth, where am I supposed to go?"

I'm finally getting to know people here and the Elders are teaching me the things I need to know about the land and the Country and about my family. There's always a feel somewhere. I'm starting to feel like I'm home. Finally. There's also an Aboriginal organisation that came and found me and told me about things I could get. I don't feel so much shame talking to them - they are Aboriginal too. I asked them about driving licences and they organised those for me. So maybe they could be alright.

Removing children and young people from Country leads to disconnection from family, culture, and language. Yet stakeholders said there was sometimes little effort made to find alternative family when there was a concern for a young person's safety.

They also talked about the lack of understanding of what 'family' and 'safety' looked like, outside of a narrow concept, particularly where the case worker doesn't have the same background as the family they are working with. Aboriginal families have had to endure the results of this, for generations. Aboriginal people talked about the importance of involving Aboriginal workers and ACCOs so that there aren't preconceived ideas about families and communities, and the best effort to find a safe environment for a child can be made. In some cases, workers told us that Aboriginal families, particularly, don't come forward as carers, for fear they will be assessed negatively and to protect their own family from the Department.

Family finding should be a priority to identify family members or related adults able to care for children and young people.

We heard that some residential care homes and housing options are not culturally safe for young Aboriginal people. Cultural support plans are also reported to be missing and not completed on time for young people.

Stakeholders have also highlighted the lack of Aboriginal staff and carers in the out-of-home care system.

Stakeholders have highlighted as a priority the need for more Aboriginal staff and carers as a priority, considering that the majority of young people in care are Aboriginal.

Stakeholders have also highlighted the damage to young people that occurs when they are cut off from family, and placed where they hear and start to internalise negative things about their families, their culture and the places they come from.

Stakeholders consistently talked about missed opportunities to support young people while they're in care, which compounds difficulties as they transition into adulthood. This includes early intervention for children and young people needing mental health support to address the trauma from any neglect or abuse, as well as from being removed from families.

Workers told us that so that counselling is often not culturally safe, and that it is experienced as intimidating, formal and scary. Children also say they are afraid psychologists will report back to the Department, potentially impacting their families, and don't feel they can be honest.

Traditional yarning with Elders was suggested as one way to provide a safe and private space for young people to talk and open up.

Youth workers have been highlighted as a key positive resource in the system to build trust with young people, build their confidence, and help them access the services and support they need (e.g., Centrelink, strength-based and outreach engagement helps break down barriers).

Leaving care planning often happens too late (after 17), when some essential tasks should be completed by district office staff earlier, such as planning for housing. This places young people in stressful situations as they prepare to leave care, an issue which is compounded further by the systemic shortage of housing across the state.

Starting to plan the leaving care transition (e.g., housing) early is vital for young people, particularly for those in residential care or high need placements, who have no option to stay on after they turn 18.

Many young people would or could return to extended family or community after leaving care. However often no effort has been made to keep young people connected through their placement and/or they don't have people they trust to help them reconnect, meaning this service isn't available to young people.

Youth workers reported they lose time chasing tasks that weren't completed by case workers before young people left care, such as getting ID, setting up bank accounts, applying for Centrelink or getting on social housing wait lists. This impacts the youth workers' ability to support young people towards their goals, such as finding a job or applying for TAFE. Getting original ID documents for young people was cited as a common challenge that can impact young people's ability to find a job for instance.

Rigorous and comprehensive leaving care planning (including ensuring all young people have the documents they need to live independently), needs to be prioritised by the Department. Any delay to secure important documents can negatively impact the quality of additional support provided by other services.

Youth workers can be instrumental in supporting young people to understand their leaving care entitlements and helping young people navigate the Department systems, which is a complex task due to the inconsistency of practices across District Offices.

We have heard of many cases of youth workers brokering communication between young people and the Department; often because young people do not want to engage with and do not trust the Department due to previous negative experiences, but also because the Department has been reported to be more responsive to professional requests than to young people's.

Although youth workers are vital to help young people navigate the system, they cannot carry the responsibility on their own. There is an onus on the Department to be more accessible and responsive towards young people, and to offer consistent support across regions and offices.

Workers have told us that many young Aboriginal people will want to go back to Country and culture, however this does not seem to be recognised as a priority in post care funding as many young people struggle to get funding for Country visits.

There are opportunities for the Department to prioritise young people's connection to culture by allocating funding to return to Country, particularly in post care funding. And - as with many things - failing to do so only leads to more damage for people later in life.

Aboriginal Practice Leads (APLs) play key roles in supporting young Aboriginal people to understand and reconnect with family. They can offer a cultural lens on things like sorry business that are not understood by non-Aboriginal people. Like many workers in the system, APLs are already frequently working more hours than they are paid for, to try and meet the level of need in a system where resourcing doesn't keep up.

Removing children and young people from their Country and family can significantly impact their opportunities to reconnect with their family further down the line (e.g., loss of language, cultural coding). Workers reported the loss of identity and feeling of alienation can lead them to "fall on the wrong side".

ACCOs bring a set of knowledge, skills and resources that can help young people access what they are entitled to while living and understanding their culture and experience in a way that non-Aboriginal organisations cannot do. Connection to Country and Culture could further be supported in the community by connecting young people to Elders for mentorship and guidance, as suggested by some stakeholders.



## Sam

is a young man who likes working on cars and being in nature. He has an intellectual disability and is supported by the NDIS.

Sam's journey highlights the situation for many of the young people in care who have an intellectual disability and are eligible for NDIS support.

- His journey includes the difficulty of getting the right information to find out what he could get under the NDIS; it also highlights the difficulty that someone like Sam faces in getting effective advocacy that enables him to have his voice heard and his strengths and resources (those he possesses and could develop) properly taken into consideration.
- In terms of his transition out of care, it highlights how assumptions about his abilities quickly allow control of his life to be taken out of his hands. This then presents a new set of challenges and stumbling blocks to developing the skills he needs to live independently. Overall, people have low expectations for Sam and they make decisions for him that make it hard for him to challenge those perceptions.
- His lack of control leaves him particularly vulnerable to financial and other forms of exploitation; he needs specialist help to deal with and overcome these issues, and information provided in special ways so he can fully understand his options and articulate his choices.
- Service providers indicate that a large proportion of young people in care have disabilities. A further group experience challenges with understanding and processing information due to their experience of trauma prior to or during care.

I moved around a lot from placement to placement. I never got on with my carers, and I would act up and get moved on. Some of them tried to get me assessed, but I kept moving before the wait times were up and I kept having to start again.

When I was 14 I got diagnosed with an intellectual disability. They said some things couldn't be fixed now. I could get the NDIS, but my carer didn't understand the NDIS system, and neither did my case worker. Eventually an NDIS Officer at the Department helped them and I started to get things like special tutors and a support person to help me learn how to do every day things.

"It wasn't explained the best, I wasn't really sure what it was about until I got connected by the NDIS coordinator."

When I turned 18, the Department put me straight into Guardianship. A Trustee took over all of my finances and benefits. I didn't know who they were - the Department chose them for me. They took all the evidence we had to put together to get me my benefits in the first place, and used it against me - now I had all my control taken away from me.

I had to go to my Trustee for everything. They were really tight with money - it was really hard to have a social life, because they wouldn't give me money to do anything like go to the movies. I wanted to buy a guitar, but they said no. I had to lie to them about what I was buying just so I could do basic stuff like pay for phone credit.

I feel like I could have worked some things out by myself or learned how to do it. But they never gave me a chance.

"Talk to me about what I want, let me choose. They just do stuff."

I got help from an independent advocate, and it was the first time I actually learnt about my rights and what I was entitled to. They're helping me understand about the Guardianship arrangement and what I can do about it.

When I was 19 I moved into a house with two friends. I had to cook, clean, and pay rent and bills for the first time, but no-one had ever taught me. I got behind on rent, and ended up getting kicked out and put on a blacklist. That made it really hard to get my next place.

I managed to find a friend to crash with. I wanted to start a TAFE course to become a support worker for people with disabilities. I had to push it back for a semester because the Department missed the deadline to sign it off. Eventually they agreed to help with the fees, but they didn't give me any other support. TAFE wouldn't let me sit oral exams, which I need because of my disability. It would have been good to have a case worker or someone help me to explain that that was something I needed, but I didn't. So I had to drop out.

Around this time I was pretty lonely. I was drinking and taking drugs a bit. I didn't really want to, but it was about the only thing I had in my life that made me feel good. A lot of my friends were only around to try to take advantage and get some money out of me, because they knew I was on benefits. I knew that and sometimes I would try to cut them out, but then I'd get lonely and tell them where I lived, so they'd start coming around again.

"They (friends) were just trying to use me up."

Finally someone told me there was a special place I could go that helped young people like me who are leaving care. I wasn't going to go - I thought it would be the same as all the other places. But by then I had nothing left to lose.

Even though I didn't live near that district, they told me about all these things that could help me. They helped me get back into TAFE, helped me get my license, and I got some counselling for the first time, too. They taught me about boundaries and how to be stronger around people.

I don't hang around those other people anymore, I have new friends from TAFE who are really positive. I have to travel 2 hours on public transport to get to the office, but it's worth it. I can't even imagine how different my life would be if I never found them.

For many young people in care it is difficult to gather the evidence required for assessments and diagnosis, especially when young people are moving frequently between placements (which, we were told, can often be due to dysregulated behaviours resulting from undiagnosed and unsupported disabilities).

Delays in diagnosis mean that the opportunity to fix or substantially reduce issues is missed. Young people bear damage that could have been avoided for the rest of their lives.

The NDIS provides important supports, but stakeholders routinely said they didn't have the right information or training to navigate it. A dedicated NDIS Project Officer in the Albany District Office supports children, parents, and carers to navigate the NDIS system - but this is not common practice across districts.

It was reported that young people with a disability leaving care are routinely placed into legal guardianship and trustee arrangements without sufficient consideration of the needs of each young person, and without the opportunity to even try to manage independently.

While guardianship can be appropriate for young people with significant disabilities or especially complex needs, this decision should be made on a case-by-case basis and with input from young people and their carers where possible. We were told that these arrangements are currently framed, understood, and carried out on the basis of risk management, rather than being focused on providing and advocating for the child's needs.

Guardianship and Trustee arrangements can unduly limit young people's agency and rob them of opportunities to develop crucial social networks and independent living skills (for example, managing personal finances) as they move into adulthood. Without other adults to support and advocate for them, they can end up without the help they need to negotiate an appropriate arrangement.

Service providers such as Developmental Disability WA play a valuable role in providing independent advocacy for young people with disabilities, including those in the care system, despite limited capacity. Access to an advocate independent from the Department of Communities is crucial for young people who often have limited agency and for whom many decisions about their lives and their transitions out of care are made on their behalf.

Many young people reported struggling with the demands of independent living after leaving care, because they had not had the opportunity to develop important household and financial management skills during their time in care. Losing housing and ending up with debts and/or blacklisted on rental lists was commonly reported.

These are the kinds of situations that a dedicated leaving care team is designed to support young people through. We heard this was not routinely happening.

We heard a number of reports of young people experiencing delays in pursuing education, employment or recreational opportunities because of delayed Departmental approval processes. It is also reported that in practice, TAFE fees are not being waived or paid for for care leavers, even though the provisions to do so clearly exist.

There were also many cases where inflexible or impersonal policies or supports created barriers for young people when a personalised, flexible approach could have averted problems and saved resources in the long run.

The social isolation that can often come with a care experience can be exacerbated by having a disability. When young people are presented with limited opportunities to build positive connections and networks, they can find themselves isolated or at risk of negative influence and being taken advantage of.

People who had found their way to positive, proactive services (either a DoC post-care team or an effective leaving care service), reported that it made a huge difference in their lives. They were able to get practical help in terms of TAFE fees, driving lessons and bills paid referrals that they said were taken more seriously with the advocacy of a paid worker to support them (e.g. to social housing and refuge); and they could access things such as psychologists and counselling that they could not otherwise have had. People who had found these services reported feeling more emotionally ready for leaving care - and for life.



## Jeremiah

is a young Yindjibarndi and Ngarluma man living in the Pilbara. He likes swimming and the way his mum cooks damper.

Jeremiah's journey is one that highlights some of the issues that particularly affect Aboriginal people who are in care.

- This includes the experience of being removed from culture and Country, continuing intergenerational removal in many cases.
- When Jeremiah leaves care, he ends up returning to families and communities he was taken from - finding that they have not gotten any help with the issues they faced that led to his removal, and have not improved or gotten worse. Many stakeholders for this project told us this often happens before a young person has turned 18; it is not uncommon for 12 year olds to be ending up self-selecting out of care, and entering these kinds of unsupported arrangements.
- Jeremiah's story also highlights how child protection intersects in many Aboriginal communities with intergenerational disadvantage and extreme poverty, meaning that supporting young people like Jeremiah needs to be done in the context of supporting the whole family and the whole community.
- Jeremiah's journey also highlights the need for Aboriginal people to be involved as workers and supports throughout the process - from assessing child safety, to supporting young people while in care to maintain connection to family and culture.

*"do stay in touch with them now - but just to see my sister (in foster care). It's never hard to see her. She's got a really good care worker. It's as simple as that."*

*I was taken into care when I was about six. Mum and Dad would hit each other when they were drinking. It was mostly only on paydays. Me and my brothers and sisters used to just go next door to one of my aunties' and go back when it finished.*

*At the school I went to, there were some Aboriginal workers and we did learning in our ways and in whitefella ways. I did OK at that school. But the Department came and said we weren't safe. They tried to get one of my aunties to have us, but she was too scared of the Department to get assessed - what if they took her own children? So all us kids got taken into town and split up into different families. None of those families were Aboriginal.*

*I missed my brothers and sisters and my Mum and Dad and my Country so much. At the new school there were no Aboriginal teachers and people used words I didn't understand. They would get really upset with me for drawing and getting distracted in class. My carers were always having to go to school and sort things out for me. It made them really mad. They told me I had to behave better. I wanted to see my brothers and sisters, and other family in town, but my carers said they weren't good people and they didn't want to get involved with any of them.*

*"Carers have a lot of power over how young people perceive their families, their understanding of what happened and why they are in care, which can affect their relationships with family for life." (Agency worker)*

*"You're just going from one site (school) to another site (school). There's no incentive to try in school." (Young person with care experience)*

*My carers gave me back to the Department, who put me in another placement. This happened maybe ten more times. I didn't even know the names of half of the people who looked after me. I didn't bother remembering them after a while. Some of them were mean, some of them seemed ok, but after a while I just stopped talking. What's the point getting to know anyone when you just keep having to move? I tried to keep going to school - I would have given up, but my sisters went there and I wanted to see them. But it was too hard to concentrate - wondering if when I got home I was going to have to go and live with some new family again. So I couldn't really concentrate.*

*"Getting a new care worker, over and over - the constant staff turnover. There wasn't a single one I remember the name of!"*

*I ended up just going and staying with some of my family in town. No one came looking for me. It seemed like they had too much to do, and when I decided to leave care I was just one less problem for them to deal with. The house was full of people so it was pretty smashed up, but we could usually get a feed from somewhere. The older kids were up all night playing games so I gave up on school and just started doing that. It was more fun. Then my sisters moved in, too. It was even more people to feed, but at least we were together.*

*"do stay in touch with them now - but just to see my sister (in foster care). It's never hard to see her. She's got a really good care worker. It's as simple as that."*

*I really wanted to get back to see my Mum, so I got a lift back when some family went. It turned out that after I got taken away, they started drinking all the time and doing other drugs too. It's worse than it ever was. It was like when the kids got taken, they had no more hope. I heard they tried to call us, tried to send us things. But we never got those things. I don't know what happened to them.*

*One time I was in town I met someone who worked for one of the ACCOs up here. I knew him, he used to work at the school. He told me I could come in and have a yarn any time. They said there are lots of jobs on the mines here. He said they could help with getting a license. There are even ways to go back to school if I want. I'm not sure about that stuff right now, but my little sister is really smart. I might yarn with her. We could go together.*

*Now I go back and forward between family on my Country, and family in town. It's all pretty chaotic. But family's family. I wish I had stayed here. I might have managed to stay in school, to stay with my Aunties and that.*

*I sometimes wonder why they took me away, when I just ended up back in the same place anyway. They said it was to keep me safe. But all that happened was that things got worse.*

*Me and my girlfriend are having a baby soon. The woman from the Department who took me away came and told me they need to talk to us in case we aren't good parents, they could take our baby away.*

*Since I've been back, I've been walking on Country with the Elders. They teach me the important things I need to know about the land, my Country. They teach me about being strong in culture. I've got a lot of healing to go but I'm where I belong.*

Removing children and young people from Country leads to disconnection from family, culture, and language. Yet stakeholders said there was sometimes little effort made to find alternative family when there was a concern for a young person's safety.

They also talked about the lack of understanding of what 'family' and 'safety' looked like, outside of a narrow concept, particularly where the care worker doesn't have the same background as the family they are working with. Aboriginal families have had to endure the results of this for generations. Aboriginal people talked about the importance of involving Aboriginal workers and ACCOs so that there aren't preconceived ideas about families and communities, and the best effort to find a safe environment for a child can be made. In some cases, workers told us that Aboriginal families, particularly, don't come forward as carers to protect their own family from the Department.

There is also the need for training for all carers of Aboriginal children, to ensure they have what they need to help Aboriginal children grow up strong in their culture, including family finding practices.

Aboriginal children can find themselves lost when they have to change towns and schools. They are expected to shift placements and navigate unfamiliar cultures and contexts without support from people who understand what they are going through and who can explain it in ways that make sense to them.

They also said that whether or not they could have contact with siblings who are also in care depended on the case workers - some made it happen, but some said it wasn't possible.

Carers and workers can also say things and behave in ways that end up with Aboriginal children hearing negative views about themselves, their families and culture.

Many children in care end up having multiple short-term placements. Stakeholders talk about how destabilising this is, with children not able to concentrate at school, and not feeling like they have people they can trust or even know looking after them. Yet still there are often not efforts to reconnect children to their families. In some instances, supported safety planning could have resulted in a safe placement that kept the child in their community, and with siblings.

Children's trauma responses including acting out at home or at school, shutting down, self-harm and life-long difficulties with trust and attachment.

Stakeholders reported a wide range of responses by schools, with some being excellent at delivering a positive, trauma-informed response, and others not responding to children's needs in a useful or effective way - and sometimes adding to their trauma in their responses.

Aboriginal children as young as 13 are leaving care placements and going to live with different community or family members. In some instances people said that case workers are so overworked that when this happens, there is a sense that it's 'one less child to worry about' - even if nothing is known about where they've gone.

Case workers will sometimes say that they don't know where children have gone. But Aboriginal people said the children's location is usually known among the community, who are often looking after them informally - without any of the supports and funding a formal carer would be entitled to.

Aboriginal Practice Leads and ACCOs could support other people to connect with these children and the carers. But there is a need to invest in trust and relationship building between all parties before anything else can happen.

Regardless of the situation before or after being taken into care, children who leave care want to be with their family and often return to them.

There is often little or no help available for families for any issues they have, or to keep connections between families (including among siblings in care) once children are in care, and having children taken away can be a catalyst for deterioration in families' situations.

Where there is help, families and young people are not always made aware that it exists or helped to find their way to it. Caseworkers who have the information may not have the time to pass it on, or know the families well enough to know what is needed. This means children leave care (formally or informally) to return to families in a similar or worse situation than they left. Making any kind of difference for such families requires a whole-of-family or whole-of-community effort with meaningful investment of resources in terms of money, staff and time.

There are many ACCOs and other government and non-government agencies who provide a range of services and options for young people, including help to find work, get driving lessons, find housing, and connect with health and other services. For some young people from care it is too much to ask them to trust any person or agency associated with the process and system they've been involved with.

By the time they are 18 or even younger, many young people have already informally left care, and are living with family or community they have found themselves. Some of these are positive placements, but in many instances they are returning to communities steeped in the outcomes of entrenched and institutionalised racism, such as overcrowding, violence, drug use, and poverty. The child protection system did not address any of these issues, but the children and their parents are now carrying additional trauma as a result of being involved with it.

We heard from stakeholders that pre-birth planning (involving child protection prior to a child's birth) was routinely started where a parent was a child in care. The multi-generational damage from child removal for Aboriginal families and children continues.

There are many ways of helping people to heal. Stakeholders consistently asked for options that included Aboriginal people, Elders and other community members to help young people who are hurt to heal and grow strong in their culture and themselves.



**Leila**

is a young woman who arrived in Australia as a refugee. She likes cooking and wants to be a social worker.

Leila's journey highlights how effective leaving care planning with predicted and planned transitions and effective supports can position a young person for success.

- In this journey, Leila's LCP process was expected, predicted and well planned. She was actively involved in the process, along with those she deemed important to her. She was repeatedly offered services and supports that she wanted - including those she had previously declined.
- In terms of Leila's journey out of care, people who knew Leila wrapped themselves around her, and provided her with what she needed, when she needed it. She was able to build trust in the people and the process. This not only offered her what she needed at the time, but made her feel like whatever happened, she would be able to get help with it.
- There are potentially challenging issues that arise - such as obtaining identity documents which, as a refugee, are challenging, but because these have been planned for, they do not derail the process or hold up other things.
- Leila ends up being well prepared when challenges arise along the way. By the end, she is offered other things she would have been able to apply for - but decides to decline them - because she has what she needs.

Seven or eight months before I was going to leave care, my case worker came and talked to me about what was going to happen. It was a bit scary, but I've known her for a while, and she made sure I knew there was plenty of time and we'd work together to make sure everything went well. There were a few things like getting ID that they said would take a long time so they got those started straight away.

All of the people who have been working with me over the years got together, and we all worked out a plan together. They asked me who I wanted there. I said my carers and my mentor. We all talked about if I'd thought about where I wanted to live, if I wanted to keep studying. And we wrote everything down and they explained how they could help me and what I had to do myself.

My mentor who I've known for years took me to the leaving care people. I didn't know them, but they told me there were lots of things I could get after I left care. There was a part of me that didn't believe it - could there be all that help? Really? But they kept their promises to me, and I started to think, maybe it's true?

I said I wanted to live at Foyer, and they helped me get an appointment to talk to them so I could check it out. I did - and it seemed like it was good. So they helped me with the forms and that.

I asked for driving lessons, for books for Uni. They asked if I wanted to keep seeing the counsellor, but I said no. Everything I asked for I got - nothing was too much trouble.

The post-care team asked me what I wanted. They kept telling me I could get anything I wanted. Even though they told me that, I didn't really believe them. I thought, nah, it's not going to be real. I'm going to be unsupported. I didn't realise, they really do support you until you're 25. It was only when I started to experience it - they did everything they said they would, and then they did even more. I don't know if it's like that for every kid? I hope so. That's how it was for me.

Foyer couldn't get me in straight away, but we'd already arranged for me to stay on with my carers until it could be organised, so I just waited and then it just came through and I moved in there.

My ImmCard came through while that was all happening, so I could start looking for a job. That took 8 months in the end. It's good they started organising it when they did.

It turns out that not everything was as good as I thought it would be. The first semester at Uni was pretty hard, and at Foyer I had some friends but they left. I felt a bit sad sometimes. But my mentor or my case worker would call in for coffee, and it made me feel better. I asked if it was too late to go to the counsellor - they said of course not, they wrote a letter and got me in quickly and paid all the bills.

I'm focusing on the future now. I'm keeping up with my Uni work, and I want to be a social worker to help other young people from care. I'm moving into a share house with people I met at Foyer. My mentor told me I could get some other things - like \$1500 from a leaving care fund. But I didn't apply. I've got enough.

Stakeholders talked about a leaving care experience that is expected and planned being the cornerstone of success. Key elements are that the young person is approached in plenty of time to plan and understand what's happening, and that the approach is made by/for through someone known to the young person.

Things that take time - like ID - are started early. There are certain cases where this is more important, such as for young people who don't have birth documentation, in which case ID's can take months - with later steps such as getting a job, getting Centrelink and enrolling in study all potentially being delayed where it is not actioned. The current casework manual outlines the requirements for LCP to commence at 15.

Where young people talked about a leaving care planning process that was good, they talked about being a partner in their leaving care planning, with a say in and control over what's happening. They also talked about having others who are significant to that young person and who know them also involved.

This is part of what enables young people to consider a full range of options, and which encourages them to have goals and ambitions for the future. All of these expectations and requirements are laid out in the current casework policy manual.

Even young people who reported having a stable and positive experience in care said they needed time to trust the people and the process they are becoming part of. A successful transition provides for this time, and allows for them to build new relationships with the people who will be supporting them through the transition. Where they express fears and doubts, these are acknowledged and validated.

Care leavers also talked about not wanting to be a burden on workers; workers who understood this consistently and repeatedly made offers to young people, recognising that even if they say no ten times, they might say yes on the eleventh.

Young people get help to identify all of the things they are likely to need. They are able to change their mind and add things if they miss things out. Young people leave care with their ID, leaving care plans, cultural plans and everything else they need. Promises that are made are kept.

Care leavers also talked about not wanting to be a burden on workers; workers who understood this consistently and repeatedly made offers to young people, recognising that even if they say no ten times, they might say yes on the eleventh.

Where care leavers said things went well, it was where things were mapped out and planned with the young people, so that they knew what was happening and there was a safety net in the meantime. Where they had a job offer, getting ID had already been put in train. Where they decided to study, the case worker could respond quickly to sign the forms, arrange any financial help, or get them any books or materials they needed.

Young people consistently reported housing as their major need and one that could be tenuous and unstable. Transitions between housing need to be planned for, to avoid homelessness; preventing homelessness is vital not only for young people's wellbeing, but because getting out of it can prove almost impossible.

Young people who had had this experience reported not only that they had what they needed, but that they felt prepared - for whatever might happen.

The young person isn't left unsupported, but is actively assisted throughout the process - including through periods they are doing well. Some young people reported being 'left alone' when (or because) things were going well. But young people's circumstances are highly changeable, and it's important that people keep in touch with them so that any issues can be ironed out early.

Young people also reported that the Department was able to 'make things happen' - get them into appointments with mental health professionals, get them into housing, or into other services - that they couldn't do themselves.

Care leavers bring all of their experiences before and during care with them as they leave care. Their experience leaving care is a part of how well they end up facing the future.

When they had a good experience leaving care - when everything the Department is responsible for is delivered in line with policy and procedures - young people not only reported a better outcome that was far less resource intensive, but not needing to access all of the payments and services that they would be able to - because they don't need them.



## Greg

is a young man whose spends most of his time gaming. He also likes watching YouTube clips about the stars and the solar system.

*I got taken into care when I was young and put with a family who had a few other bio and foster kids. It was chaotic where I came from. It was chaotic in care, too. Just different chaos. The family took in lots of babies, and they needed a lot of attention. The carers were tired a lot. But there was always food on the table, mostly things were clean. It was OK.*

*I never really got school. It didn't make much sense to me. I tried to ask at home, but the carers were tired. Teachers too. I liked drawing so I just did that in class and they left me alone.*

*The other kids found out I was a foster-care kid, and there was some name calling and that. I started eating lunch in the toilets to stay away from it. Eventually they found someone else to pick on.*

*I got given a computer at home and I started playing some games. My carers told me I shouldn't spend all my time doing that, but after a few times they gave up. I spent more and more time online. It was fun. Better than school, better than home.*

*My school realised I wasn't going to pass NAPLAN. They told me to stay home the day of the test. So I did. I didn't really need much encouragement not to go out of my room anyway. It was the nicest and safest place I knew.*

*I met all kinds of people. Some tricked me and took game credits and that, but some seemed OK. The other kids used to have case workers come and visit. They'd sometimes come and take a look at me, and say, 'everything OK?' and I'd say 'Yep, all good.'*

*But sometimes I'd feel pretty down. I worried about the future a lot. I'd go days without sleeping. I'd start to look up things online. Things about how to kill yourself, or about people who liked to hurt other people. I found some ideas that at first seemed pretty out there. But I found a lot of people talking about them, so then they just started to seem normal.*

*When I was seventeen, someone came from the Department and told me I'd have to move out of home soon because I was finishing school. They asked me about getting a driving license, sports or music I liked. I said, 'I like gaming.' They said, 'what else. Nothing,' I said. They showed me some farms. The words were hard for me to read but I signed them anyway. I've worked out how to keep them happy.*

*They told me I had a public housing house. I moved into it. I don't really know the area, it's far from everything and it's a bit scary there.*

*I took my gaming stuff with me, so I mostly still just do that. Anyway, I basically don't have any money left over from my Centrelink to do anything else. I feel really anxious all the time. I hate my life, I hate myself. I just spend days gaming. I don't even really like it anymore, but it's the best way I know to not to think about anything.*

*When the case worker comes around, they say, 'everything OK?' and I say, 'yep, all good' and they ask me what I'm playing and I tell them and then they leave me alone.*

Greg's journey highlights an emerging group that stakeholders identified, being that of someone who is extremely socially isolated.

- People like Greg have not typically acted out at home or at school: as a result, they have largely 'flown under the radar' - escaping the attention of anyone in the system (Communication, Education and other).
- In terms of the transitions out of care, Greg will present to leaving care services with potentially a lack of social and practical life skills, as well as mental health issues, educational challenges (including poor literacy), undiagnosed disabilities, and potentially deep trauma that may manifest in externalised or internalised ways in the short- or long-term, none of which has been seen or addressed in any way to this point. His social isolation to date may pose an additional challenge to working with Greg and he may reject or only passively agree to support.
- Even without any of these issues, people like Greg have no or few friends or social networks, and are likely to struggle to connect with people in all kinds of settings.
- Case workers reported that there are more and more people like Greg turning up on case files.

It is not uncommon for children in care to report being one of many in a home (that includes biological and foster children).

Most carers are doing their best, but young people don't always get what they need at home; and with workers also overworked and overwhelmed, they may also be missed by professional staff.

While some children react to bullying or negative experiences by acting out, we heard there are many who respond by seeking to avoid any attention.

Young people like this, and others who are struggling but who don't 'make a fuss', can end up 'under the radar' at school - doing enough to pass (at best), but not enough to really keep up. In an environment where there is far more need for support than workers can respond to, they can end up not ever being referred to support (for example Education Department of Education Services Officers). There is not currently enough pro-active outreach for such children, who while quiet, end up at extreme risk due to low achievement, potentially undiagnosed issues, and social isolation.

For some children, there is a retreat into solo activities - with videogames an increasingly common one. Carers can be relieved that they are left to spend time with the other children who are outwardly manifesting crisis or with younger children. However these young people end up not forming friends or having friendship circles and not learning vital social skills, which creates a self-perpetuating cycle of social exclusion.

For children in care, things like excessive gaming or other on-line activities comes on top of whatever abuse or trauma they experienced before being removed into care, and the trauma of the removal and care experience.

Excessive time alone or online can end up compounding these impacts, and manifesting in ways such as self-harm or psychotic episodes. These young people are also at extreme risk of on-line exploitation, (including sexual and financial). However, such young people's alienation and pain remains largely invisible to those around them - for reasons including that they profess to be 'just fine'.

The reality of the young person's extreme risk may not even be apparent at the point of transition, if they maintain that everything is 'fine'.

Carers/workers have often had less to do with children who are not externalising their issues and difficulties and thus might not have the right relationship or knowledge to spot that anything is wrong. This includes critical deficits like basic literacy and numeracy; there are children who manage to go through high school without anyone noticing that they cannot functionally read and write.

Young people who have a care experience are already more likely to have internalised that they are 'a bother' and dislike asking for help as a result - increasing the risk that they don't get the attention they need.

Stakeholders we spoke to talked about the growing number of young people who are 'missing' - in terms of not being visible, and not getting any help. In a system in crisis, young people who are quiet, uncommunicative and don't 'make a fuss' are unlikely to get a great deal of proactive outreach - as carers and workers simply focus on others. This is despite their being at extreme risk of mental distress and possibly self-harm.





## Jada

A young woman from an African background. She likes science and art, and spending time with other young people in her area. She wants to be the best. Mum she can be to her young daughter.

Jada's journey highlights the specific issues that many young women go through.

- This includes a pervasive fear – grounded in reality – that the stigma of having been a child in care is enough for their own children to walk away.
- They talk about feeling judged and stigmatised in many mainstream services – including those for other parents, such as play groups, and needing specific services for other mothers like them.
- In terms of the transition out of care, their needs for things such as housing, health and mental health services are more acute, due to the fact of having a history as well.
- However, the judgement and stigma – and fear – is likely to cause them to withdraw from or avoid services, particularly anything to do with child protection.

Jada's journey also highlights some of the specific difficulties that young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds might share, particularly if they have been outside of their own ethnic group.

- This includes not having people around them who could empathise with and support them through their early experiences of racism and ethnicity, and feeling caught between different cultures and beliefs outside – rather than within – their family.
- In terms of transitions out of care, assumptions could be made about the types of services they would find, which further those linguistic and cultural barriers to mainstream services – when the reality may be more complicated.
- The transition out of care is also occurring when many young people are looking to understand and identify more with an identity, including their cultural identity. For young people who have experienced racism in the past, this means they want to pursue their own identity.

When Mum was young, the Government stopped the most vulnerable children going to the government boarding and housing care when they left.

I had to go into care with a foster carer who was white. It was okay at first – we didn't have many white people. Things seemed different, they had different food, they used different words. For years I started to pretend that I had parents that looked like me – but over time, we all got used to each other and I realised they cared about me. I didn't want to see my bio family, but my carers tried to keep me connected to my culture – with a cooking group in community days and stuff. I just felt abandoned.

When I was 18, my foster carers could no longer care for me. It was a big shock because I thought I'd always stay with them. They'd promised me we would go travelling together. I just felt abandoned.

When I moved care I also had to change schools. The kids in the new school were mean to me. They called me names and said I was stupid and ugly. It was tough because I didn't know anyone else who looked like me and when they said things about where I came from, I didn't have anyone to talk about it. The new carers didn't seem to mind it was that important. I tried to talk to them about things like my hair, which needs special care. They said that was silly. My friends from school and social media weren't around either. Someone from the Department came but I'd never seen them before. I didn't know who they were or when they wanted.

When my first partner got pregnant I knew I wasn't ready because I didn't know how to be a mum.

I also didn't feel safe at the new foster home. They always had people over. In most of the time, I would go to my boyfriend. He was the first person who ever seemed to care about me as I started getting really attached to him. His family were from a different African country too – not exactly the same as where I was from, but his mum knew some things about things and I could talk to her about her stuff with racism and abuse. That was really helpful.

I pretty much stayed there until the end of Year 12. By that time, I wanted to make them controlling my boyfriend was. He always wanted to know where I was and what I was doing.

I had so many friends because of my boyfriend and felt isolated. But I liked having a family that looked like me – even if they weren't mine.

I got so stressed up in my head about it, but because I was no longer in care, I didn't think anyone could help. I was already 18 so I just assumed I was on my own now.

I thought people would help me.

They don't like asking for help. They want you to help them, just like the reason because you're not a kid. They're like, "You're not a kid!"

I was about to leave when I got pregnant. My pregnancy and the birth was very tough. My boyfriend started hitting me so I got out. But then I was all alone, and I just was not ready to be a mum. I could not believe it was happening. They said I had postnatal depression and struggled to bond with my baby. I didn't want to tell anyone I was struggling though because I was the worst of the Department would take my child away from me. I knew some people from around my community and I tried to connect with them, but they were really judgemental. It felt like there was no one to help me.

In my first job, I was really scared. All this stuff I hadn't thought about before – about my Mum and Dad leaving me and then giving me up – that came up when I had my baby.

I had to go back to my mental health. The places I called said their services were just too long so I should go to hospital. So I ended up going to the Emergency Department but they said there wasn't anything they could do for me because I wasn't in crisis.

Many young people are coming back on the run and being in jail.

Some young people were more serious in hospital, they're in treatment but get worse.

I didn't go back to my mum's for a while so she could help but my brother threatened me. He did drugs and was violent. The health care referred me to the Department. She said she was worried about my mental health and domestic violence.

A child protection worker came to see me and they put a plan in place. I had to attend so many appointments, things like counselling and learning about relationships. It was really overwhelming to have all this going on and feeling in care for my baby at the same time, but I was worried they were going to take my baby if I didn't do what I was told.

Someone told me about a place that helped young parents so I went there. There's a youth worker there who's really nice. She's black but grew up in a white family – like me. Sometimes we talk about things I need, sometimes we just talk about things we have in common. The background makes me feel a bit better about everything – but really, she's just a nice person and I feel like she has my back. They're also got a playgroup there. It's nice to meet other mums who've gone through a bit. I don't feel like I'm being judged like in other places and I'm starting to make friends who help me out.

They referred me to a service for African young people – but because of how I grew up, I didn't feel African enough for African ones, and I didn't feel white enough for whites. Where is the place for me?

Things started to get better, and the Department managed to get me into social housing. The house is in a pretty bad state, but it's stable and it's mine. Really, there are some places I can go where I don't feel judged, where I don't feel out of place.

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Changes in placements, such as the trauma young people have already experienced by being removed from their families, and significantly impact their sense of self and relationships with others.

The lack of and instability of placements has been highlighted as an important issue in this, particularly in regions.

We have repeatedly heard from professionals that stability and good placement experiences is what can best prepare young people in their transition into adulthood.

Ensuring young people know about and remain connected to their culture should be a priority for the moment they come into care.

We have heard that a number of young people 'fall silent' out of care before 18, sometimes even before 18.

Establishing a relationship and placement impact young people's self-esteem and can make them more vulnerable to abusive relationships. Workers have also told us that the lack of appropriate housing can make young people more vulnerable to risky or abusive relationships (e.g. moving in with abusive parents).

Family and domestic violence is a common issue experienced by young people.

Young people and workers have told us about the need to help young people learn about what healthy and abusive relationships should look like while they are still in care, to prevent family and domestic violence.

Workers and young people have told us about the need to specifically support young people who are in care because left care is a big step and support them as they become parents.

These young people often won't have had positive parenting being modelled to them as children and so such require additional support and reassurance as they become parents.

Becoming a parent presents a great opportunity to positively and proactively engage with young people, their love for their children being a powerful motivation. It is important that this support is provided as prevention or early intervention, for example by a service provider rather than the Department, as the trauma and fear of intergenerational violence is likely to present a barrier to engagement.

Young people and workers have told us that it is very difficult for young people to access mental health support, due to long waiting and complex eligibility criteria. As a result, some young people end up being hospitalised or taken to Emergency Departments because they are 'left to go to hospital' but not often treated easily there, so only people serious can be admitted. There is a lack of other and specialist prevention and early intervention in the mental health space. Subscribers have told us about the difficulties for young people to access mental health care funding once they have left care.

Young people who have left care unintentionally from priority services to mental health services. Such prioritisation could be in line with the Rapid Response protocol, which is a Cabinet endorsed across government framework aimed ensuring that a range of government agencies support young people in care and care leavers until the age of 21 by providing them with priority access to the services that they require.

Subscribers have told us about the need to support young people transitioning with their families while in care and in their transition into adulthood. Many young people still return to their families, particularly as they become parents themselves. However, this transition is often not supported and can be detrimental to young people in care where their families' situations or circumstances present a risk to them, adding further emotional trauma after reconnection with their family life.

Young people could benefit from someone to help them transition with their families, supporting them to understand potential risks and identify safe ways to reconnect.

Workers believe that child protection involvement in young parents' lives can result in some young parents being 'over-protected', which is not always what they need to get support. This can be overwhelming and can cause young parents' mental health to decline as it takes away their independence and parenting capacity.

Another issue is the lack of availability of many services, difficult to access via public transport. Many young people can't afford a car or haven't had the opportunity to take driver's lessons.

Supporting young people to complete their driver's lessons and get their driver's licence in their transition out of care should be a priority, as it is often instrumental to access the services they need as well as job opportunities.

There are opportunities to further develop specific services that support young parents who have been in care.

Engaging with Young Parents Support Service and Substantive Family Transition Support Service further playgroups so those young parents can share their experiences, which often results in them supporting each other. Youth workers also connect young parents with relevant agencies, for example by occasionally inviting external agencies (e.g. child health nurse, TB) to meet the young people they support in their space.

However, ensuring for these programs is important to be limited and some programs have limited availability – they become another thing that's hard to find, get into and stay connected with.

Young people have told us that they sometimes require support offered while in care because they didn't want to engage with it at the time or didn't see the value in it. For institutions that do know they could access it later on. Some reflected that they weren't receptive to contacting it managers but would have benefited from it later on.

Throughout every transition with care leavers, youth workers, social workers and others, we heard how people are overwhelmed, working under too much pressure, and things that have been able to do their jobs.

Many young people are ending up feeling overwhelmed in their care or with supports they find for themselves.

Many young people have the personal resilience and skills to do this, and informal supports can and should be a part of what a young parent brings around themselves to manage. But it is often reported as young people feeling overwhelmed, alone, and left to find for themselves.

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## Ash

A non-binary, LGBTQ+ young person. They live in the Great Southern region. Their favourite school subjects are Drama and English.

Ash's journey highlights some of the issues LGBTQ+ young people can face:

- LGBTQ+ young people are almost twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to experience homelessness and more likely to experience it as an evicted tenant, due to rejection in the home. This opens them up to higher risks of vulnerable housing tenancy, higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse, and higher rates of mental ill health.<sup>1</sup>
- A person's response to a young person's coming out as LGBTQ+ can end up as stabilising a placement, such as any family being approached. However, there are additional concerns for children in care, who have already had multiple life issues, and should expect a trauma-informed response from those the Department has put in charge of caring for them.
- In terms of Ash's reaction out of care, their journey shows how, when the Department make steps to provide supports, the problems raised when the placement broke down, and up compromising and worsening, leading up with Ash in a protection situation. However, it is good that the system step up to support them - they are left to try and figure it out alone.

Ash's journey also highlights some of the specific issues for young people in regional areas:

- This includes the additional challenges of getting and maintaining independence in the country if you don't yet have a licence and
- The challenges of trying to maintain staffing. While we heard this across the board, it was acute in regional and remote areas.
- In terms of housing care, this is likely to raise some challenging issues for the Department in terms of adequately resourcing housing care functions.

I've always known I was gay, but I hid it until I was about 16 because I didn't think my career would approve - their church says it's not OK. When they found out I'd been messaging another boy, they said I could go to the church and try to pray about it. When I said I didn't want to, they kicked me out. They didn't even let me get my stuff. I was on the street, with nothing. The Department tried to find another placement for me, but most of the other careers around here are from the same church, so there wasn't anywhere different to put me.

They always found me somewhere else, but it was on a farm about 20 kms from town. They were nice people, but I was about as that farm. I really wanted to get a job, or sometimes hang out with my friends after school, but every time I wanted to do anything or go anywhere I had to get them to drive me. They've got five other kids and jobs as well - and sometimes they said no. So I'd just go to school and then come home to these people I didn't really know.

I saw a flyer about some kind of support group for gay young people in town, so I started going along. It was after school so I told my career I was at a home work club. It was really good, because I started to understand there were other people like me around. They talked about things like neutral pronouns - I'd never heard of those things before.

My career found out I was lying about going to the home work club. I didn't want to say where I really was - my dad career drove me out. But because I wouldn't tell them, they asked me to leave, too. It hurt that they didn't know there was a reason I lied.

I went and crashed with a school friend for a while, the mum ended up helping me get an ID card and told me about getting up bank accounts and direct debits when bills came. They ended up asking me to drive, though. Their house was just too small.

I went back into the Department after to see if they could help, but everyone was new, and they were really busy, and they kept saying how they had a lot of little kids and babies. Some of the workers were only a few years older than me and weren't from the town, so they kept saying they'd have to find things out.

They told their husband but sometimes I feel like I know more about this town than they did. They gave me a number to call if I needed anything - but I didn't really know what it was for.

My friend's mum helped me get a room in a house off a Facebook group. Criminal wasn't enough, so I got a part-time job in town - there's plenty of work around, but it was tough looking after myself all alone and the guy at the house was a bit creepy. I didn't really know how to do anything - cook or clean or anything and the guy made me feel weird so I just ate just food in my room mostly. After a while I started to feel so tired and run down.

Because I wasn't eating much, I started losing health issues. I was very tired in school and looked unwell. The school called me in - I thought they were going to offer me help, but they accused me of doing drugs. It was really upsetting to be judged like that because I was actually doing well in school. But because I came from a foster family and they knew my mum did drugs, they accused I would too. They didn't try to understand what was really going on.

But we fought a bit - she said she didn't even know if I was supposed to be a girl or boy anymore. Then one night she got high and threatened to kill me. So I left.

I tried going back to the Department. One thing that was good was that they asked me what gender I wanted to be known as. It's not really sure yet so I asked to be called 'they', and they always did that. And when someone else called me a different pronoun, they corrected them and told them what I wanted to be called. I've started to get so anxious when talking about it, but that made me feel like I was OK. That they stuck up for me. That was good. They told me about another place but I didn't really understand what it was, so I didn't go.

I feel like I just need a lot of help. Someone to talk to. Help to get my licence would be a big one. Someone to talk about my options with. I get that the state looks need help. I was one of them, too. But doesn't matter any more?

Stakeholders in regional areas told us that careers in those areas were predominantly older and white, and many were associated with churches. While any family seemed to be challenging to deal with issues such as gender and sexuality, they felt the care or profile meant there was a higher than average possibility that they could be socialised with such issues, which meant young people to struggle not only with coming out, but with even simply asking questions about sex and sexuality. Many workers more broadly reported not feeling that they had the skills or knowledge to talk about sexuality or supporting young people with their questions.

Regional area young people talked about the difficulties of getting around - particularly without a licence, and the impact this had on things like job and leisure opportunities, their ability to develop independence. While this might be experienced by many young people in rural areas, there are additional factors for young people in care, such as confidence to make demands of their careers, balancing the needs of multiple foster children, and the realities of potentially having to move out on their own and with less support, making independent living skills (such as getting a job) a higher priority.

There is an awareness issue for young people, particularly for the majority of young people who have had multiple care arrangements. They talked about being unwilling to share personal information with people they didn't know well, which may include religious-related guidance, sexuality or sexual activity.

They also talked about the importance of informal supports in their lives - people like friends' and partners' parents, sports coaches and so on. They are often isolated people in young people's lives, who are providing support and help in a range of ways.

While all Department staff talked about workload pressures and staff turnover, Department offices in regional areas particularly highlighted the difficulty of getting, and keeping staff in regional towns. This was also true of regional support services. They also talked about not having much a choice in staff, and sometimes ending up with people who didn't have the right attitude or skills.

One of the ways this workload is being managed in the context of these limitations is by diverting requests for assistance to Central intake, rather than requests being handled by local staff in person. When this happens, important things are missed for young people - such as explaining the process and maintenance relationships, being care planning, and having the chance for young people to come and chat about the problems they face and get help.

Young people repeatedly talked about feeling bad for asking for help - they need to be encouraged and enabled to do so, not made to feel bad. Practices such as diverting young people to central numbers, seeing people in public areas or care workers telling young people how busy they are with other cases, while no doubt true, don't encourage or enable young people to seek help.

The lack of housing in regional areas was reported to be even more acute than in Perth areas. There are a range of strategies being implemented, such as shared housing being advertised on Facebook groups. The challenges can leave young people who are desperate for somewhere to live open to abuse and exploitation.

A crucial step in young people's out of home care is to help them develop independent living skills (e.g., cooking, cleaning, self hygiene) housing people and service providers have reported that there's currently no one actively supporting young people to learn these skills before they leave care. This can have a serious impact on young people's health, housing situation, and wellbeing.

There is a lack of experience for young people who are in care and missed opportunities to support them in transitioning to their education and career. Many young people have reported feeling judged by their school, because of their care experience.

There are opportunities to improve multi-agency work around the young person to ensure their needs are understood met (e.g., via conferencing between the school and other professionals).

They talked about not having access to important information from their biological families, including about medical histories (their own and their family's).

They often seek to reconnect with family - either because they have relocated other options or, more usually, because they want to reconnect with family. While being in care has broken some connections, they are usually still in the same town and can stay in family equity.

Young people could benefit from someone to help them navigate these relationships, understanding potential risks and identifying safe ways to reconnect.

People who were transitioning to a new gender spoke about their anxieties of having to interact with new workers and people, because they might be asked questions about it, or have to explain that their preferred name was not their official name.

In one instance a young person commissioned the support they got in DaC for this and how it made them feel supported and welcome.

A number of young people we spoke to said they had never been offered any housing care planning or support, did not know what was available and did not know who to ask about it. They were getting by through their own efforts - sometimes doing well, sometimes not.

When they access other services - such as employment services or Centacore - they were told about or offered supports through housing care that could help them.

Young people leaving care get that people are removed and reconnected. Some of them said they were managing okay. But most people we spoke to for this project predominantly reported not being able to find the help they needed, leaving them without secure housing (including a number who were homeless), not having the basic things they needed, and feeling abandoned and alone.

Sometimes get help from my career, or I don't like bothering them. So I just need to do anything on my own. Young person with care experience.

As a non-binary, there is no specific worker in Great Southern to support out there, just 16 other staff who support occasionally but they're already managing lots of children aged 0-16. Agency worker.

It was a private Christian school. If you come from a foster family, it's a problem.

One important thing was the support the Dept of Housing didn't think they'd support me being LGBTQ+ but they really did. Using the right pronouns, using my name even though I hadn't officially changed it. I was quite a shock - I was being really anxious, expecting it not to go that way.

In the end I bought a tent and started living in that. I'm scared every night but I don't seem to have any other options. I tried an employment service, but they did nothing - all the jobs they had needed a licence or drivers or something and I don't have any money to get them. I feel like I'd have more options in Perth or other places, but I don't see how I can get out of this town now.

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# Dylan

is a young man who likes computers and would like to work in IT. He has been involved with the criminal justice system.

Dylan's journey particularly highlights how vulnerable young people in care can end up being in the criminal justice system - and the challenges of turning things around once that has occurred.

- In this journey, it is the way that the leaving care planning (LCP) process was handled - coming late, uncompleted and rushed - which destabilised a previously stable placement. The LCP was often experienced in that way by young people. While this was not always destabilising in the way described, there were cases where it was.
- In terms of Dylan's journey out of care, it started from one where a planned and supported journey would have been possible, but instead it created new issues for him which end up sending him down a pathway towards homelessness and crime that end up with him engaged with the criminal justice system.
- Once this occurs, there is a lack of supports that would have been needed to help Dylan to recover - including coordinated attention between the Departments of Communities and Justice.
- Dylan ends up unable to manage a transition to independence without support. The costs and resources that could not be found by Communities end up being spent many times over - collectively by agencies such as Justice, Health and Mental Health.

Starting school is a big transition. Children make them different and are disoriented by it." (Agency worker)

I started school and realised that other people didn't live in foster families. When they realised I couldn't read as well as other kids, they really started teasing and bullying me. I did start to wonder about my own family, but no one knew anything. I didn't like school but I tried really hard and some teachers helped me. I started to do well, which made me feel good.

I did well at NAPLAN in year 8 and thought I could do something with computers like my foster dad. The Department came to start to talk to me about leaving care planning, and I told them I was interested in going to University. They said maybe TAFE would be more realistic. But my foster parents still encouraged me so I thought it might be OK.

Choosing care was at 17, I was rushed into foster care. I was told to do as much as I could think of, and I thought after the hours I would get some.

I was just 17 and in year 12 when the Department got in touch and told me I was an adult now and I had to move out. They asked what I needed, but I didn't know. I didn't know I had to move out and it just threw me. I wanted my foster Mum to talk to them but the Department said it was time for me to make my own decisions. I asked if they'd pay to do this, but they said something practical like bedding would be better. The woman seemed really busy so I just signed the form. From then on I couldn't concentrate at school, worrying about when I had to leave. And then I ran away from home.

I ended up being really hungry, so I stole some food and the police got called. I wanted to go back to the foster family but I was too ashamed, and anyway, the Department had told me I had to leave. When the school found out, they suspended me. My case worker said they'd call to help sort it out but they never did.

I didn't have any way of getting food or other things, so I kept stealing and ended up in Bankside Hill as a result. There were teachers in there, but often there weren't enough staff to take us to classes so I couldn't do school. I was still hoping that case worker was going to call but she still didn't.

In Bankside Hill they told me I had really bad hearing. No one had found this before. They also told me I had ADHD. They gave me medications that made me feel calmer and got me hearing aids. I started reading lots more in there - the medications also seemed to really help me concentrate.

After I left Bankside Hill I realised I felt really anxious and couldn't organise things or think properly without these medicines. I went to a doctor to ask about them, but she thought I was just overreacting. Then I found out how much they cost. I couldn't afford them anyway. I tried going to the Department but it was someone I didn't know, and they wanted the whole story again and I couldn't be bothered. So I just went without.

Someone I met in Bankside Hill told me that they had a youth worker from TSI. I went to their place to see if I could get one, and they helped me with some food and some clothes. They also told me I could get driving lessons from the Department and helped me organise those. What I really needed was somewhere to live, but they said they couldn't do anything about that. I guess I could have asked about the medications, too - they seemed pretty helpful - but I thought maybe I'd already asked for too much.

Someone from Housing called me and told me I was eligible for a social housing house - it turns out they'd put me on the waiting list when I was in residential care. I was excited to have a place to live, but the place was next to where neighbours doing drugs, and the first night I was there I got broken into. It felt like being in residential care all over again.

I'm 19 now. I still see people from Bankside Hill around, they're in adult jails now and they tell me what kind of things to do to just get a few months in jail at a time. At least in jail I have somewhere to sleep and food to eat, they will give me the medications I need to help me feel better, and there's a library where I can read about things like science and nature that I'm interested in. Some of my family are in there, too. I'm getting to know them. It's a pretty bad life in jail, but it's a pretty bad life for me outside, too.

Mostly people reported that children in foster care are starting school without the things they need to do well.

They also reported that they understood the stigma of being in care, and that bullying and victimisation were common, as a result of not having the right uniforms or clothes, for not being with their parents, or because of frequent school moves.

Most young people are disconnected from their families through being taken into care, and reconnection is rarely made a priority.

Across the board, stakeholders talked about aspirations for children in out of home care being low, which started young.

Staff report that there is not enough time to do things like build aspiration or goals with students, and that when there are changes in placements, education is routinely interrupted.

Leaving care planning was often reported to be rushed and not well understood. The policies allow considerable flexibility to approve variety of things, but they are inconsistently applied. There is a sense that young people have to know what to ask for - and that they miss out if they don't. Young people aren't provided with a voice in the process, and their wishes aren't taken into consideration.

The low aspirations for young people continue, with case workers discouraging them to "settle" for lower level occupations and skills, rather than aiming higher. Overall, the process has the potential to trigger trauma, going into repeated feelings of abandonment and powerlessness.

Workers told us that once children had been involved in the justice system, it becomes more difficult to find placements and other housing services for them. They also said that schools start to try to find ways to exclude young people after justice involvement, especially if the offences are serious or repeat. These exclusionary responses build on the history of attachment breaks and exclusion many young people have already experienced, which build distrust and take away any reason to try. All of these issues make it more difficult to break the cycle of justice involvement.

Ultimately, this situation describes a child who is still in care, who is not having their basic needs met.

Residential care services are usually the last resort when no other placement can be found. Young people who had been in residential care generally reported a negative experience, including being in fear of other children. While supposedly separated in terms of types and levels of needs (mental or legal behavioural issues), it appears that some young people are being put in homes that expose them to higher levels of need.

The environment exacerbates trauma, doesn't offer the same opportunities to develop natural networks (such as with careers, family and friends networks). Without the opportunity to stay in a residential care placement post-18, these young people are more likely to end up homeless if they cannot secure housing.

Stakeholders said that there are not effective ways of coordinating services between the Departments of Communities and Justice and Education regarding planning for the needs of young people who are in care while they are in detention or when they are released.

Agency workers talked about children needing and deserving consistent parenting, at the time, however, rather than being an opportunity to increase the attention paid to young people, some people said in reality once children were in Bankside Hill, DoC staff would pressure (sometimes, stated that case workers diverted their attention to other children instead - because while they're in Bankside Hill, at least they're safe. We know where they are. We don't have to house them.)

Stakeholders also reported that it was becoming increasingly difficult to get specialist staff in the juvenile justice system - so that even the opportunity may be more often be missed in the future.

Young people consistently report that they don't know how to get things they need and can't find anyone to help them. This includes practical things, such as replacement ID, medications, payment of TAFE fees.

They also report how exhausting it can be to continually be asked to tell their story and justify the things they need. Many reported not wanting to "bother" or "upset" people by asking for too much. They regularly reported going without.

Services such as TSI offer useful supports when they are available as intended. Young people who had contacted with TSI or other youth workers said they gave them useful help and support, and often made them feel confident and safe.

Some stakeholders noted their ability to respond can be limited - housing was repeatedly the major gap, but they noted the resources they had access to had been 'cut', restricting what they could do to help. Stakeholders also said that TSI workers commonly have unsustainable workloads (0-24) despite this, year-long waiting period.

Young people reported that they often ended up finding things out from peers or other young people on the bus, rather than having coordinated access to information when they needed it.

DoC has been working to prioritise care leavers for social housing, for example automatic enrolment on waiting lists. Young people reported that the housing options (including social housing) they were able to access weren't always suitable for them and were sometimes unsafe, and that when they had problems with their tenancies, they weren't able to get help.

Social housing also creates and contributes to workforce disadvantages that make it far less beneficial for young people to take on work - and in fact can see them going backwards, financially if they do.

The ability to successfully manage a housing tenancy was something that multiple stakeholders reported could see young people back - as if it failed they could end up blacklisted on rental data bases, with debts to the DoC and/or with additional fees or trauma as a result.

When people are in jail, they have their basic needs met. They have food and somewhere to sleep. For people from some backgrounds - those who face day-to-day discrimination and judgement, for example - jail is an accepted and even expected part of growing up. Where DoC fails to help young people get what they need to survive, the justice system often ends up as the fall back option. It means the responsibility to young people that DoC failed to.

# Summary of insights from journey mapping

The key moments that tend to end up with a young person heading towards “planned success” leaving care - or major unaddressed challenges - are outlined below:

Prior to leaving care	Starting the Leaving Care journey	Planning with the young person	Developing trust	Getting help with basic needs	Forward planning for things that take time	Planning for transitions	Knowing who to turn to when things go wrong	Facing the future
<p>“Planned Success” (where young people talked about having what they needed and feeling prepared for the future) - Leila’s journey (page 15) provides an example.</p>								
<p>Opportunities to develop natural networks or relationships that carry across leaving care (and beyond).</p> <p>Consistent efforts to build positive cultural and other identities.</p>	<p>Planned and expected, with time to process what had to be done and what was happening.</p>	<p>Young person is actively engaged and can choose who else is engaged.</p> <p>They are supported to do their part of the work and given choices and options.</p>	<p>New workers introduced through known people.</p> <p>Promises made are kept.</p> <p>In-person relationships - not phone numbers.</p>	<p>People consistently reach out and make offers of help.</p> <p>The young person has money, basics (eg. furniture), and someone to help them with things they don’t know about yet.</p>	<p>Things like citizenship and ID are started early so there are no delays or challenges.</p> <p>Opportunities are created to meet and connect with family in a supported way.</p>	<p>The young person knows where they are going to be living and has what they need to succeed in that housing situation. Planning takes place for transitions.</p>	<p>Trusted people reach out and check in so that any issues can be proactively addressed.</p> <p>Offers made multiple times - in case circumstances change.</p>	<p>Young people feel like they have what they need to face the future.</p> <p>Their use of other services (health, MH, AoD, etc) is reduced.</p>
<p>“Major unaddressed challenges” (where young people said they felt poorly able to overcome their challenges - Dylan’s journey (page 19) provides an example.</p>								
<p>Multiple placements and placements in group homes.</p> <p>No knowledge of or connections with family.</p> <p>Family members’ issues unresolved</p> <p>Disruptions to and negative experiences in school (including low expectations)</p> <p>Hearing negative things about your culture or family, with no opportunity to process or understand.</p>	<p>The leaving care journey was commonly described as rushed, unplanned and not understood. Care leavers weren’t always clear if they’d done leaving care planning, and routinely didn’t understand what it was about.</p> <p>Leaving care planning did not typically commence at 15, but 17.5 (or later).</p>	<p>LCP was often done by people they didn’t know well, and did not involve people relevant to the young person’s transition. Young people sometimes weren’t present or actively involved, and/or their preferences weren’t respected or supported.</p> <p>Young people said that they felt encouraged to ‘aim low’ and that things like tertiary study were discouraged and not prioritised.</p>	<p>Care leavers reported being made to feel like they were a burden, and referred to multiple different workers or to ‘central intake’, where there is no opportunity to build a relationship.</p> <p>They were seen in public places (lobbies) or in rushed appointments.</p> <p>Workers frequently told them they were too busy with other cases to help.</p>	<p>Care leavers were without basic needs - such as housing, medications and disability supports.</p> <p>They didn’t understand what opportunities there were to revisit previous decisions and get new things added to LCPs. Where they tried to approach people they commonly weren’t given information they could understand about the assistance DoC should be providing to them.</p>	<p>Things like ID, citizenship, and referrals were not done or left to the last minute.</p> <p>Aboriginal young people routinely said cultural plans and family finding work was not done prior to leaving care.</p> <p>Department workers were not able to avoid long wait lists or lack of suitable services. Housing is in chronically short supply.</p>	<p>Care leavers often happened across supports rather finding them in an organised way</p> <p>Housing is a major challenge across the state. Young people consistently reported:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being placed in social housing that was not well suited to their needs and/or unsafe;</li> <li>• Ending up with debts and being blacklisted;</li> <li>• Ending up homeless or couch surfing.</li> </ul>	<p>Care leavers are left to to sort out unexpected changes on their own.</p> <p>The first port of call is other young people in care, who may or may not have the resources to help.</p> <p>They end up in precarious situations such as violent or exploitative relationships because they don’t have anywhere else to go.</p>	<p>Young people find themselves struggling to survive - possibly homeless or in insecure housing, in damaging relationships, and/or involved with the criminal justice system.</p> <p>Issues compound and deepen, and their ability to pull themselves out is severely hampered.</p>

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# **Summary of findings**

# Summary

What we learned about the strengths and gaps in the leaving care and and post-care service landscape in Western Australia

## ***The Department has responsibilities to all care leavers to provide financial, practical and social support.***

The Department has responsibilities to provide financial support to care leavers to the age of 25, as well as to connect them with service providers and agencies who can provide them with things they need to successfully transition to a healthy and well adulthood.

While these services are provided in a landscape that includes other providers (including those offering Home Stretch, Leaving Care Services and other services), the Department retains responsibilities to and for these care leavers, with those responsibilities set out clearly in policy.

## ***Aboriginal people, families and communities continue to be uniquely and severely impacted by past and present day child removal.***

The impact of colonisation and the continued disproportionate removal of Aboriginal children over generations have resulted in unique damage to Aboriginal people, families and communities in the name of child protection. The system continues to be designed and staffed in large part by non-Aboriginal people, many of whom do not understand, prioritise or respond to the unique needs of Aboriginal children and families. As a result, Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities continue to be harmed.

## ***When young people get effective leaving care and post care support, it makes a huge positive difference to their lives.***

Young people who find their way to effective leaving care and post-care services provided by the Department or by Leaving Care Services or other youth support agencies, in combination with other formal and informal supports, report a huge positive difference in their lives.

Care leavers report that these services help them find and keep housing, to stay connected with study and enter work, and to feel prepared for the challenges of becoming an adult.

## ***Many care leavers are missing out on support from the Department. Some are ending up unwell and unsafe.***

However, many care leavers are not getting what they need and deserve from care leaving services. Too often the services are inconsistent and patchy, they don't respond to young people in a caring and empathetic way, and they rely on young people working out how to find them. Many young people are never told there is anything available to help them.

It is not so much that the policies and procedures don't exist; we found examples where care leavers received exactly what is outlined in policy, and were thriving. The issue seems more so that existing policies are not consistently followed or sufficiently resourced.

Some care leavers are strong and resilient and manage to thrive regardless. However, many speak about ending up homeless, unwell, and trying to deal with the legacy of their care experience alone and unsupported.

*"The Homeswest housing was really unsuitable. It got broken into three times, the door got bashed in. I had to pay for it. It wasn't safe for me or my daughter ... you can't even get into a homeless shelter, the line goes down the road ... In the end I bought myself a \$14 tent from Kmart and slept in that."*

- Young person with lived experience.



# Summary

What we learned about the strengths and gaps in the leaving care and post-care service landscape in Western Australia

***With the introduction of the Home Stretch approach, there is a risk that Communities could reduce attention on its own leaving care and post care services. If this were to happen, it would disadvantage many care leavers who may not find their way to, want to access, or be eligible for a service offering Home Stretch.***

The adoption of the Home Stretch approach is a major step forward for young care leavers. Delivering Home Stretch WA across the State is crucial as it will address many of the issues faced by young care leavers with the provision of unique supports that were previously not available to them. However, Home Stretch alone cannot fix all the gaps in services to care leavers that are identified in this report, and its effectiveness is linked to the wider service system in which it operates, including supports provided by the Department.

Some gaps identified here are affecting young people who are not accessing Home Stretch, either because they're not eligible (age), don't know about it, or choose not to access a Home Stretch service. As such, the introduction of Home Stretch WA in the sector must be seen as something that is available as a vital addition to, not instead of, services provided by the Department.

All care leavers need the Department to improve its current leaving care processes and procedures so they can also access - at least - the financial, practical and social supports that it is the Department's responsibility to provide. This is generally not a case of providing new or different supports but of consistently and without exception delivering what is provided for in legislation and policy - including supported referrals to other youth and mainstream service providers, including those offering Home Stretch-informed approaches, Leaving Care Services, or other services (housing, health, family support, and so on).

***There are bright spots of good practice in WA and elsewhere that point to opportunities for innovation and improvements. In particular, there are good things happening across the system, which could readily be replicated or scaled.***

Despite the many acknowledged challenges, WA and other jurisdictions offer many examples of innovative and creative practices that are making a real difference to young people. These show that there is the potential within the system to respond to needs, including in localised pockets of good practice. We suggest such good practices should be identified, codified, and implemented at scale. The examples of good practice identified throughout this report offer some places to start.

There are also broader opportunities to better coordinate inter-agency responsibilities for care leavers. This includes opportunities to bring the whole community together around supporting young people to succeed. Experience from elsewhere also offers some examples of what this could look like in practice.

*"The Post Care Team asked me what I wanted. They kept telling me I could get anything I wanted. Even though they told me that, I didn't really believe them. I thought, nah, it's not going to be real, I'm going to be unsupported [after leaving care]. I didn't realise, they really do support you until you're 25. It was only when I started to experience it - they did everything they said they would, and then they did even more. I don't know if it's like that for every kid? I hope so. That's how it was for me."*

- Young person with lived experience

# Considerations regarding Home Stretch integration in the leaving care landscape

Throughout this project, stakeholders have raised questions about Home Stretch's integration with the current service offering, particularly around the coordination between Home Stretch, Leaving Care Services, and support directly provided by District Offices (e.g., Leaving Care Teams, Post Care staff). The below highlights key questions to consider as Home Stretch is further rolled out across the state and as the Department considers the allocation of dedicated resources to Leaving Care and Post Care in District Offices.

*'We need to think about this from the perspective of young people. How does this make sense for them? How do we explain to them the difference between Salvation Army TSS and Salvation Army Home Stretch? Are they going to have to hop around between services and go back to TSS waitlist when they finish with Home Stretch at 21? We need to simplify things for them.'*  
- Agency Stakeholder

## From 15 to 17

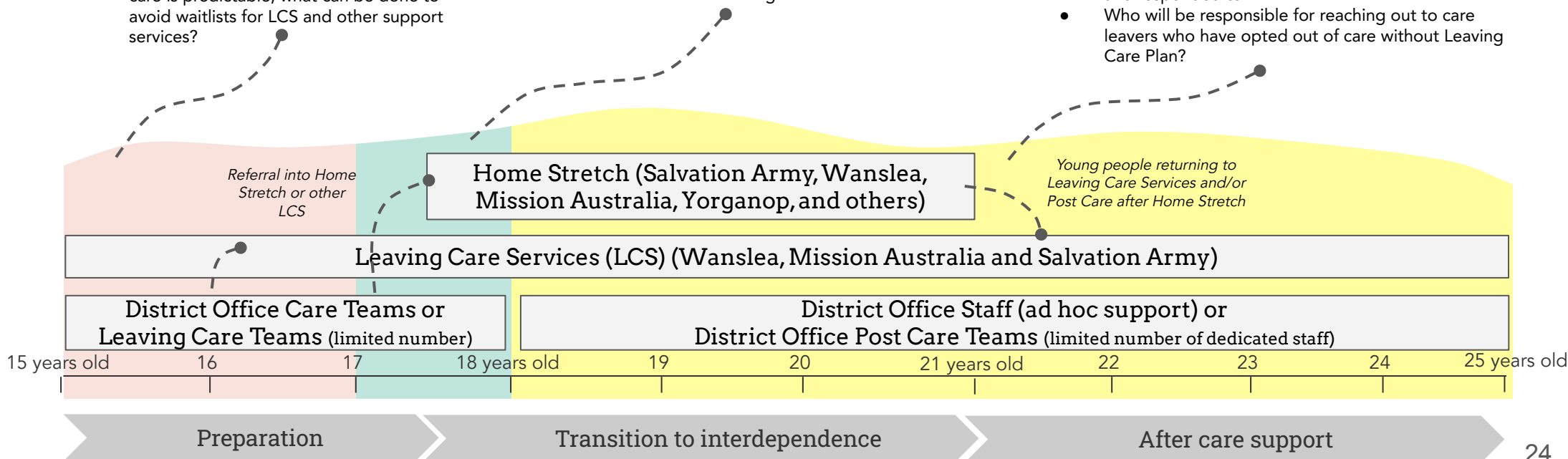
- What needs to be done to make sure all young people get access to leaving care support from 15 - including those who have already left care?
- How will Leaving Care Teams integrate with Leaving Care Services? How will roles and responsibilities be defined to ensure young people get integrated support?
- How will Care Teams/Leaving Care Teams be resourced so that all young people can access comprehensive leaving care planning?
- Given that the number of children leaving care is predictable, what can be done to avoid waitlists for LCS and other support services?

## From 17 to 18

- How will the options for care leavers (Leaving Care Service, Home Stretch, other) be explained so care leavers make an informed decision?
- What will referral pathways look like (including for young people wanting to transition from a Leaving Care Service to Home Stretch, or vice versa)?
- Who will be responsible for reaching out to young people who have already opted out of care without Leaving Care Plan?
- How will workforce challenges and turnover be managed?

## From 18 to 25

- How will Post Care Teams operate so that every care leaver has access to ongoing Post Care support in their local region?
- Should the service offering be streamlined to ensure all young people have access to similar and consistent supports from 18-25?
- What should the coordination between District Offices (e.g., Post Care Team) and Home Stretch or other Leaving Care Services look like post 18?
- Where will young people be referred to at 21 after Home Stretch? What will these transitions look like? How will deteriorations in situations be identified and responded to?
- Who will be responsible for reaching out to care leavers who have opted out of care without Leaving Care Plan?



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# **Activities undertaken**

# Service Mapping Workshops

November 2022 -  
February 2023

## Intention

The objective of these service mapping workshops was to explore the services and supports available to young people leaving care in the selected areas for this project, to understand how Home Stretch WA might impact this existing system, and to identify groups of young people with specific needs for journey mapping.

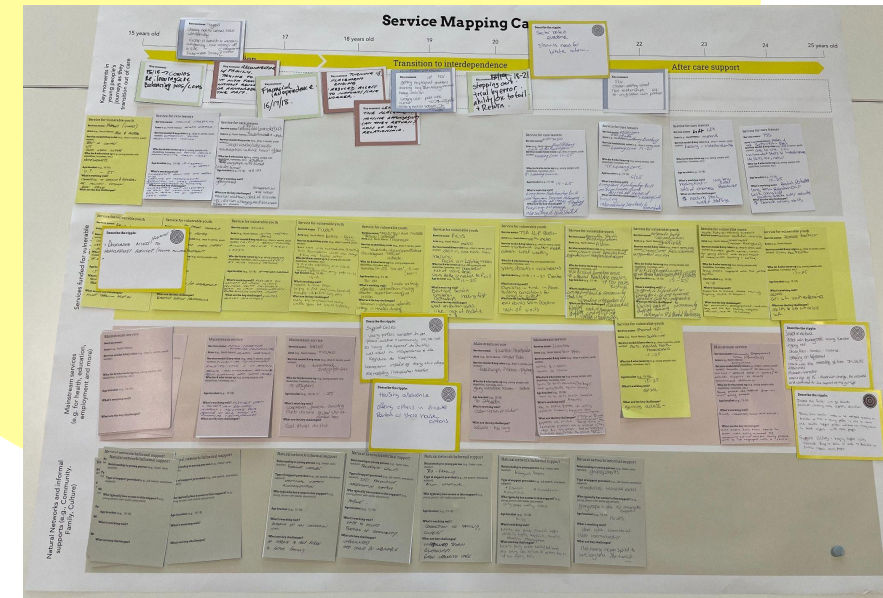
## Who we engaged with and how

We facilitated 5 service mapping workshops including leaving care sector stakeholders and service providers, including District Offices and Leaving Care Services Providers. Overall, 62 participants attended the following workshops:

- 2 workshops in person in Perth, gathering stakeholders from the metropolitan area
- 1 online workshop for the Great Southern
- 2 workshops for the Pilbara (including one in-person in Karratha and one online for Newman & Hedland)

Using interactive materials such as service mapping canvases and service cards (see on the right), participants were invited to answer the following questions:

- What formal and informal services are available to and used by young people leaving care (15-25) in your area? What makes these services more or less accessible and effective?
- How may Home Stretch WA impact and integrate with the existing leaving care system?
- What are the needs and challenges for specific groups of young people in the leaving care system? (e.g., young people with disabilities, young people involved in the justice system, young parents )





# Journey mapping group interviews

November 2022 - February 2023



## Intention

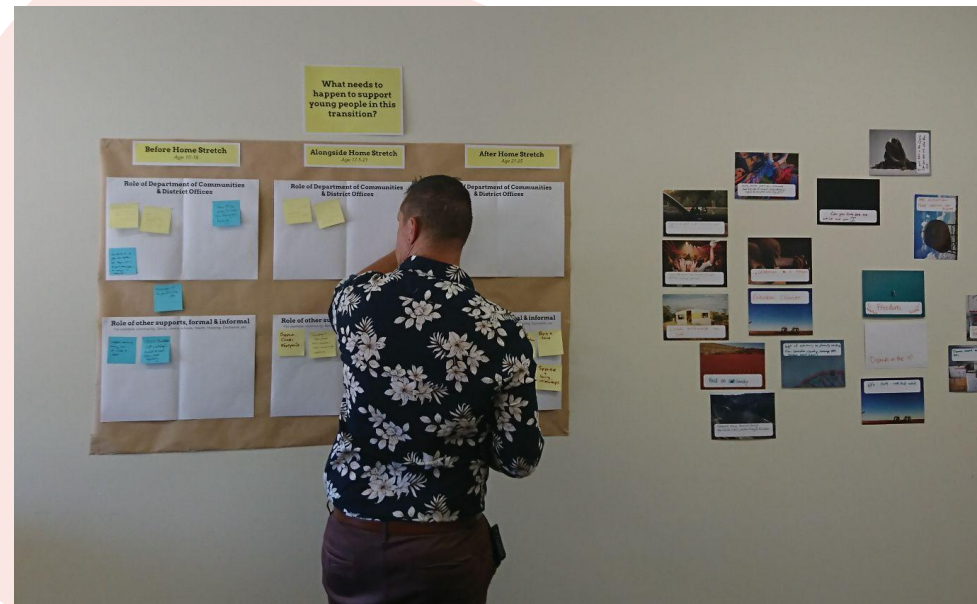
We completed journey mapping group interviews with service providers to map in detail the journeys of groups of young people with specific needs. These interviews enabled us to understand similarities and differences in young people's experiences depending on their needs and location, mapping out 'bright pockets of practice' as well as gaps and challenges, and understanding what may be needed to better support young people's transitions into adulthood.

## Who we engaged with and how

We targeted service providers with experience working with the following groups of young people, completing a total of 5 group interviews involving 29 participants (2 to 8 participants per interview):

- Young people with disabilities
- Young people involved in the justice system
- Young parents
- Aboriginal young people
- Young people living in the Great Southern

These practitioners were able to share valuable information about the key moments young people leaving care go through, across important areas of life such as housing, finance, legal, education & employment, health, and relationships & identity. They highlighted how young people leaving care are currently supported in these key moments, telling us about what is working well as well as the challenges they face. Service providers also shared their thoughts about what changes need to be considered to better support young people in their transitions out of care as they become adults.







# Additional micro-focus groups and interviews with targeted stakeholders

November 2022 -  
April 2023

## Intention

After completing the first phases of engagement, we analysed the findings gathered to date and identified areas that would benefit from additional engagement to fill gaps, particularly to better understand what good practice in the leaving care sector looked like and further investigate the 'bright pockets of practice' brought up to our attention throughout the engagement process.

## Who we engaged with and how

We completed semi-structured interviews with the following stakeholders (8 participants in total), highlighted to us as important supports in young people's transitions out of care, to better understand how they function:

- Department of Communities Education Officers (in the Perth area)
- Midland Leaving Care team
- Mirrabooka Leaving and Post-Care District Support Team
- Department of Communities Service Design and Operational Improvement Team

In addition, to bring in the perspective of foster carers in the mapping of young people's experiences of leaving care, we completed 2 interviews with 4 foster carers in:

- Mandurah
- The Great Southern



*The insights gleaned from young people with lived experience and service providers during interviews, micro-focus groups, and workshops are summarised in the next section of this report.*

# Jurisdictional scan interviews

December 2022 -  
February 2023

## Intention

In order to broaden our findings and insights regarding success factors and relevant learnings from well integrated continuums of care supporting young people (15-24), we completed interviews with national and international jurisdictional experts from Victoria, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Canada.

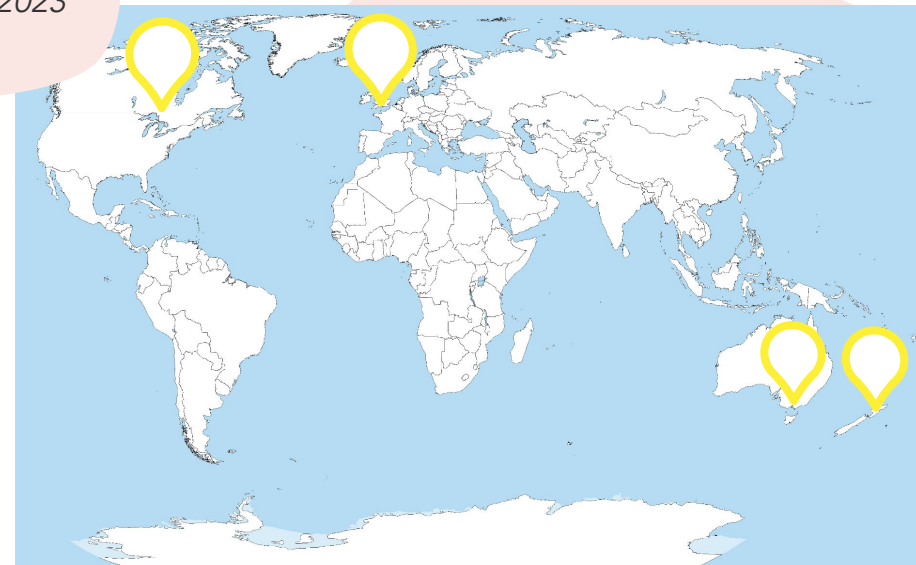
## Who we engaged with and how

In addition to desktop research, we completed four jurisdictional interviews with:

- Child Welfare Services, Government of Nova Scotia, Canada
- Wesley Community Action, New Zealand
- Innovation Unit UK
- Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Victoria, Australia.

The interviews were structured around these three main questions:

- What are the success factors and structures that enable a smooth transition out of care for young people?
- What have been the challenges in transitions out of care and how have these been overcome in your jurisdiction?
- What (if any) are the unintended consequences of introducing new leaving care services (such as Home Stretch) in existing systems?



# Engagement with stakeholders

## Stakeholders engaged in Perth metropolitan area

### Department of Communities:

Advocate for Children in Care  
Armadale District Office  
Cannington District Office  
Fremantle District Office  
Education Officers across teams  
Home Stretch Program Team  
Midland District Office  
Mirrabooka District Office  
Office of Disability  
Peel District Office  
Specialist Child protection Unit  
Youth Policy  
YPECN Inter-agency coordination

### Other stakeholders:

Anglicare WA (Young Parent Support Service)  
Anglicare WA (Home Stretch Trial & Community of Practice)  
Central Metro & Wheatbelt Youth Justice Services  
Create WA  
Department of Justice (Banksia Hill)  
Developmental Disability WA  
Family Inclusion Network of WA  
Key Assets  
Mercy Care  
Salvation Army Crossroads West  
Salvation Army Front Line Young Parent Group  
Uniting  
Wanslea, My Place  
Yorganop  
Youth Futures

## Stakeholders engaged in the Pilbara

### Department of Communities:

Karratha District Office (including Aboriginal Practice Leaders)  
Hedland District Office  
Housing (Karratha)  
Roebourne District Office  
Target 120

### Other stakeholders:

Bloodwood Tree Association Inc  
Department of Justice (Youth Justice)  
Julyardi Aboriginal Corporation  
PKKP Aboriginal Corporation  
Salvation Army (Karratha Youth Crisis Accommodation)  
Salvation Army (Transitional Support Service)  
Youth Involvement Council

## Stakeholders engaged in the Great Southern

### Department of Communities:

Albany District Office (including Leaving Care Champion and NDIS officer)  
Katanning District Office  
Housing

### Other stakeholders:

Albany Pride  
Albany Youth Support Association (AYSA) - Navig8  
Relationships Australia WA  
South West Aboriginal Medical Services (SWAMS)



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**Key insights in detail**

# Reading the insights

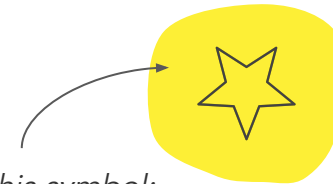
The following insights have been informed by the project's engagement activities with service providers and young people with lived experience. Relevant learnings from the jurisdictional scan have also been included throughout these insights, for the Department's consideration.

These insights were then used to develop key recommendations, which have been linked together throughout this report.

The key to the right describes the different icons used in this section and will help you navigate through the document.



*If you see this symbol:  
Click on it to read the  
relevant recommendation.*



*If you see this symbol:  
This is a practice bright  
spot, a shining example  
of local practice.*



*If you see this symbol: This is from  
the jurisdictional scan, a glimpse  
at continuums of care from around  
the world. Click on it to read the  
relevant case study.*

# Leaving Care Arrangements within Districts

***Districts appear to have a high degree of autonomy over how they apply resources to meet various client demands. We identified the following models of leaving and post-care practices within districts:***

## **Care teams supporting young people in care from age 0 to 18.**

This seems to be the most common model across districts. Senior child protection workers and caseworkers within these teams hold caseloads of a maximum of 15 children or young people in care per worker. Case workers may therefore be working at the same time with very young children, including babies, and with teenagers preparing to leave care.

Although some workers enjoy the breadth of practice that working with a wider age range provides, we heard that this can be associated with a reduced expertise in leaving care planning. These teams also said it could be difficult to prioritise leaving care planning due to competing demands across their caseloads. We heard from different district offices that this can result in late or incomplete leaving care planning, as well as a lack of engagement from young people as they are more likely to be seen in a crisis (e.g., arrest) rather than proactively.

Some of these teams have a *Leaving Care Champion* whose role is to support their team with leaving care practice. It can be challenging to fulfil this role, as they often hold caseloads at the same time.

Post-care practice in these district offices seem to differ; with some of them sharing that young people were required to call Central Intake for funding requests, often resulting in significant delays for young people to access support.

## **Leaving Care Teams supporting young people in care from age 15 to 18.**

Leaving Care Teams are initiated by District Offices themselves based on the local needs they identify. Leaving Care Teams are structured similarly to Care Teams, except case workers only hold cases of young people in care aged 15 to 17.

District workers and stakeholders said that Leaving Care Teams are better able to support young people, with earlier, more informed and comprehensive leaving care planning. Workers in these teams can develop expertise in leaving care planning as they don't have cases outside of the 15-17 age range, and can engage with young people more proactively.

Leaving Care Teams do not always have capacity to support all young people aged 15-17 in their district. In such cases, we heard that they support in priority young people with the highest needs, with the rest of young people being supported by Care teams.

Leaving Care Teams are not resourced to complete post-care work however, so young people who need support post-18 have to use other avenues (e.g., duty worker in some cases). In practice, some Leaving Care Team staff continue to support young people post-18, despite the fact that they are not resourced to do so - the lack of resourcing may impact on their workload and ability to support them.

We identified Leaving Care Teams in Armadale, Midland, Fremantle, and Rockingham. They may also exist elsewhere.

## **Leaving and Post-Care District Support Team supporting care teams in leaving care planning and providing post-care support.**

The Leaving and Post-Care Support Team model appears to be unique to Mirrabooka District Office, although some district offices seem to be developing similar practices (e.g., Karratha). This team in Mirrabooka was created locally in 2008 based on the identified need for leaving and post-care support. Although the Leaving and Post-Care Support team holds a couple of cases of young people in care, they are mostly resourced (1.8 FTE) to support the Mirrabooka Care Teams in leaving care planning, and to provide direct support to young people post-18.

The Support team provides training to workers in Care teams on leaving care planning and chairs annual leaving care meetings for young people in care aged 15-17, alongside young people's case workers, to ensure the different stages of the preparation for leaving care are completed within expected timeframes. Unlike Leaving Care Teams, the Mirrabooka care teams don't have specialist workers dedicated to working with young people aged 15-17 however, which means the Support team has to keep training case workers.

Workers from the Support team also provide direct and wrap around support to young people requiring help post 18, not limited to funding requests (e.g., supporting a young person fleeing domestic violence). As a result, young people receive more comprehensive support before but also after they leave care.

Due to Mirrabooka currently being the only District Office with dedicated resources for post-care support, the team is experiencing an influx of requests from young people and service providers from all over the metropolitan area as well as regional Australia (as far as Albany), as young people over 18 can seek post care support from any District Office. The team reported that more than half of the young people they supported are not from Mirrabooka, which has direct implications on the resourcing of this team and ongoing capacity to support these young people.

Note: Other models may exist, although documentation was not found. While outside of the scope of this project, comprehensive mapping across WA would provide valuable insights.





# Insight 1

## **Government responsibilities to care leavers are inconsistently provided with notable gaps in services provided against what is outlined in policy**

The Department has statutory responsibilities to ensure children in care are safe and looked after. These responsibilities are laid out in legislation and policy.

The model of staffing and resourcing used to carry out these responsibilities differs greatly between offices, as described on page 34. For example, Leaving Care Teams have been created in a few district offices to specifically support young people aged 15-17 as they prepare to leave care, and the Mirrabooka district office offers dedicated post-care resourcing (with a similar service being developed in Karratha). These models were universally described by stakeholders as more effective in supporting young people in their transition out of care and into adulthood.

In other offices, we found a diversity of arrangements, with young people:

- Returning to their case managers or the duty team for funding requests;
- Asking for support from different district offices; or
- Being directed to the Department’s central intake point (a public access 1800 number) for on-going post-care support.

*“It’s different district to district, how Leaving Care is done. There are some with specialists - they’re easy to consult with, because that’s what they do and all they do. Another has a post-care team - a single point of contact. It’s a shame not all districts have the same model.”*

- Government stakeholder

The difference in models across districts is one factor that results in very different levels and types of services being received by young people, with some young people getting comprehensive financial and emotional support, some getting some ad hoc funding, and some receiving little or nothing.

While we acknowledge that the practice of referrals to central intake is a practical response to workforce issues, it is particularly problematic - as it offers no opportunity to develop any relationship with care leavers. Despite this, young people sometimes thought this was their new case manager.

As young people over 18 can seek post-care support from any District Office, the diversity of district approaches leads to “district shopping” - at times supported or instigated by youth workers - to get the young people to more responsive offices.

Because Mirrabooka is generally considered to be the most responsive for post-care support, it is accessed by young people from all over the state. It is doubtful that this was the intent, and in the long-run may compromise its ability to provide high quality services to any care leavers.

*“It’s not until they leave care that we start talking about what transition to independence is”*

- Service provider

*“I thought it would be a burden if I asked for help”*

- Young person aged 24 with lived experience who didn’t know support was available post 18



### Practice “bright spots”

Following the start of the Home Stretch Working group, some teams across District Offices recognised the need to meet with others in districts and connect. At the end of 2022, team leaders and relevant staff across District Offices, including Mirrabooka and Armadale, started “Leaving Care Info Sessions” which consist in monthly online meetings gathering an increasing number of district offices (including regional). These sessions consist in sharing good practices and building leaving care capability in districts. Sessions can focus on specific issues that affect young people leaving care (e.g., Centrelink, Criminal Compensation), sharing advice as to how workers can best support young people. An ambition of these sessions is also to develop templates and guides, such as a revised leaving care plan template, which can be shared amongst district offices.

*“We never knew who else did what, everyone felt very isolated”* - District worker

# Insight 1

## **Government responsibilities to care leavers are inconsistently provided, with notable gaps in services provided against what is outlined in policy**

In addition to the district approach, other factors that affected care leavers access to services identified were:

- The worker they are allocated - with workers' ability to support young people depending on their degree of qualification, their understanding of and experience in leaving care planning, and how long they have been working in the area.
- Approvals for funding requests were also reported to vary significantly depending on the worker processing the application, as policy guidelines allow for a considerable degree of interpretation. This means there is little consistency in what young people get. There does not appear to be consistent records of post-care interactions that would allow for monitoring of what is being asked for or received.
- Experiences prior to leaving care - some young people have left formal placements before leaving care planning has started, either returning to family or trying to manage on their own. Such young people miss out on leaving care planning - and the financial and other supports they could be accessing (discussed in more detail on p.37).
- Staffing and worker turnover, which affects the time available for care planning, the quality of care and cultural plans, and extent to which young people, families and carers are meaningfully engaged.

*"There is not a single [case worker] I remember the name of. It's all I ever knew, I didn't know any different."*

- Young person with lived experience

People from care who have moved districts seem to be particularly at risk of missing out, as they reported being cross-referred ('handballed') between their original and current district offices. In some cases, young people said they gave up trying to get help at this point. Young Aboriginal people are particularly likely to experience this - as they often return to country on leaving care.

Some care leavers also experienced what they described as 'scathing' responses from workers, which increases trauma and fear and can stop a young person from ever asking for help - from anyone - again.

*"When it's a baby at risk or a teenager - there isn't time for the teenagers."*

- Government stakeholder

While inconsistency was a key finding, project stakeholders also reported that key essential elements of leaving care planning were consistently missed. The key things were:

- The age at which leaving care planning started - supposed to be 15, in practice ranged from 15 to 18 (or later) - routinely with little or no notice about what was happening and what it meant
- ID - people left care without ID and/or without an understanding of how to replace it if they lost it. ID is critical to getting a job, enrolling in school, getting a license, getting a phone, etc.
- Leaving care plans - were often said to be not completed, completed too late or not completed to a high standard (generic, not individualised, not comprehensive, did not involve the young person in planning). Some stakeholders said that only half of the young people who'd left care who they worked with had a leaving care plan.
- Referrals to Leaving Care Services (LCS) - we heard of referrals completed just before young people turn 18 (rather than at 15), which can result in a significant delay for young people to access support due to reported waitlists of up to two years.
- Cultural support plans - stakeholders reported these were less likely to be done than care plans.

Young people also said there wasn't any readily accessible information on what was available or what to ask for, which meant they missed out on things. This included information that, for example, they could seek reimbursement for things that should have been covered that had been paid for.

*"Workers respond in crisis; long-term planning becomes a low priority. Leaving care plans are pushed aside when there's a legal urgency or a crisis situation to respond to."*

- District Office worker

*"One child, she was deaf, she had been doing year 12 and had a tutor. She left care, no one remembered to include the tutor in her leaving care plan. So she left school. She hadn't understood what she had to ask for, and no one had been monitoring it."*

- Government stakeholder



# Insight 2

**An unknown number of young people have already disengaged from their care placement before leaving care planning takes place. They may be receiving no leaving care planning or post-care support.**

Leaving care planning is supposed to take place from the age of 15 onwards.

There is a group of children and young people who leave their placements before any care planning has started. This means they miss out on many supports to leave care, including financial support the Department is responsible for providing.

The more negative the young person's experience in care (eg., multiple placements), the more likely it is that these young people are to leave. This means those missing out are likely to be those who are most vulnerable and in greatest need.

*"Once young people aged 12 or 13 realise they won't be reunified with their family, they often decide to self-select. They disengage from District Office, no longer stay with their foster carers and may go find their family. At this point, they no longer receive support from Department and 'need to jump through hoops to get support.'"*  
- Service provider

Negative experiences in care are also likely to flow through into disengagement with a range of other services more broadly. This may include compulsory education, but also social services - and offers of help - regardless of where they come from.

While they could technically continue to re-enter the leaving care system until the age of 25, they are less likely to; either because they weren't made aware that this support was available to them, or because their previous experience of services has led them to completely disengage from the system. In any case, finding an entry and getting support may prove difficult, as young people's engagement is often an eligibility criterion for accessing services, and referrals get closed if the young person does not respond or engage.

*"Trying to engage with young people is exhausting because they have already been burned (by services/the department) and eventually people just give up"*  
- Government stakeholder

Some of these young people are finding their way to community members and others who are helping them, either formally or informally. Some choose and are able to manage on their own.

However, many don't. In one recent study of young offenders in Perth<sup>1</sup>, 8 out of 50 (16%) reported stealing only food - either to eat, or to take to family members. It is likely that a group of these young people were care leavers who could have been eligible for financial and practical supports they were never told about and never supported to access.

While it is young people's right to choose not to access things that are available to them, this should always be an informed decision, and one that can be reversed at any point.

*"When young people don't or can't get Centrelink, they keep doing crime so they can eat [by getting put in jail]"*  
- Government stakeholder



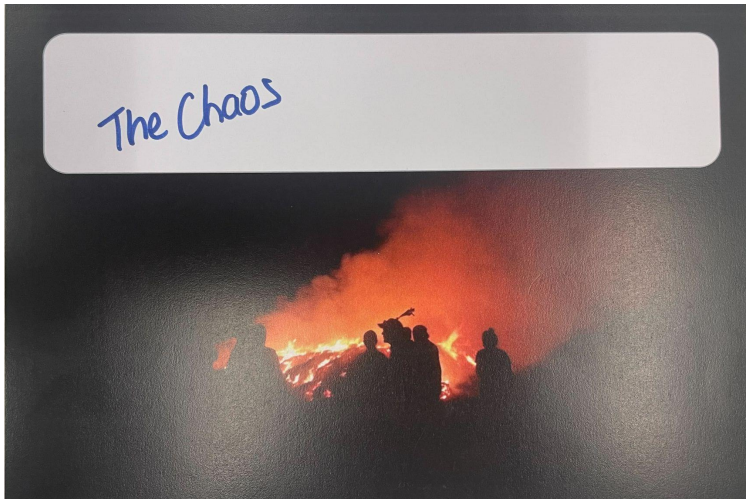
## Practice "bright spots"

After noticing many of their young people disengaged around age 15-16, the Midland District office reflected that this could be due to a lack of positive engagement with young people, who were mostly seen by their case worker in times of crisis due to competing priorities (e.g., arrested, expelled from school). In collaboration with Indigo Junction, they looked at how transition support for young people could be improved. The Midland Leaving Care Team now provides increased wrap around support with workers seeing young people on average every 2 weeks (rather than the policy requirement of at least every 3 months), proactively reaching out to them and celebrating positive milestones with them (e.g., attending their dance concert). This enables young people to build positive relationships with their caseworkers and the District Office have reported improved engagement since this new approach has been in place.

<sup>1</sup> Gately & Rock, ['I go for the food': what children and young people told us about why they steal from houses](#).

# Insight 2

***An unknown number of young people have already disengaged from their care placement before leaving care planning takes place. They may be receiving no leaving care planning or post-care support.***



*"The chaos."*

- Young person with lived experience



## **Jurisdictional learnings - Victoria**

As part of Victoria's Better Futures program, young people are offered a level of in-care and post-care support (from 15 and 9 months to 21) that is tailored to their individual needs, existing support networks, transition goals, and history of engagement. After a consultation with the young person and/or care team, they may be placed on active hold, receive limited support, or active support. Young people receiving active hold support are contacted - at a minimum - every 3 months by a Better Futures worker to check in. The goal of this is to ensure young people understand the types of support available and have the tools necessary to access it, even if they don't require or want it right then. This program has seen increased engagement and re-engagement rates since implementation, and has eliminated the need for waiting lists

*- nobody should be getting lost in the system anymore.*



# Insight 3

## ***The service landscape is complex, patchy and oversubscribed, and too often relies on young people finding their way to and through it***

There are multiple agencies within the service system, including those designed for:

- Care leavers - such as district leaving care teams and funded leaving care services provided by the Salvation Army, Mission Australia and Wanslea.
- Young people with particular needs, some of whom are care leavers - such as youth homelessness providers, youth mental health services, and juvenile justice diversion programs
- Mainstream populations - such as social housing, income support and health.

We did not find a continuum of services - in terms of a service system with predictable and logical connections, networks, information sharing, joined up ways of working. Rather, stakeholders reported a service landscape that is crowded, complex and not intuitive. Specially, stakeholders said the service landscape can be:

- "Patchy" - available inconsistently across and between districts and regions.
- Oversubscribed - with long waiting lists to access help (e.g., up to 2 years for some Leaving Care Services)
- Facing workforce challenges - with difficulties attracting and retaining staff with the right qualifications to do the work.

*"The leaving care system is ad hoc. It's so siloed and changeable. I don't know how young people get through it"*  
- Foster carer

Overall, we heard the system is not easy for young people to find their way to or through. Specific concerns and criticisms we heard regarding services included:

- 'Passing off' between offices / services - with no-one taking overall responsibility for a young person
- A lack of welcoming services for some groups of young people. Aboriginal people, LGBTQIA+ young people, young parents, and those who work with these people particularly said this.
- The constant requirement to tell your story - which for young people in care can be traumatising and complex, especially if there is the risk (or reality) of not being deemed 'worthy' of support.
- Different and conflicting eligibility criteria - including age limits/requirements.

*"Young people often decline referrals - they don't want another service in their lives. how do we come back from that?"*  
- Agency stakeholder

There are many aspects of this that are not the fault of the service providers, who by and large do the best they can with what they have. However, we heard that service providers could do better in some aspects - particularly in terms of innovating around being more flexible, youth-friendly, and providing a seamless and joined up service for young people.

It is worth noting that many young people - and many people - experience these issues when trying to access services. However, care leavers have unique situations that can increase their need to access services, in that they don't have the safety net of (other) adults who they know and trust to help them. Without this safety net, many young people don't ask for support because they don't know it is available. Young people (and those who support them) also reported it is relatively common for them not to ask for support for fear of being judged as a burden or a failure, which reinforces the need for more proactive support.



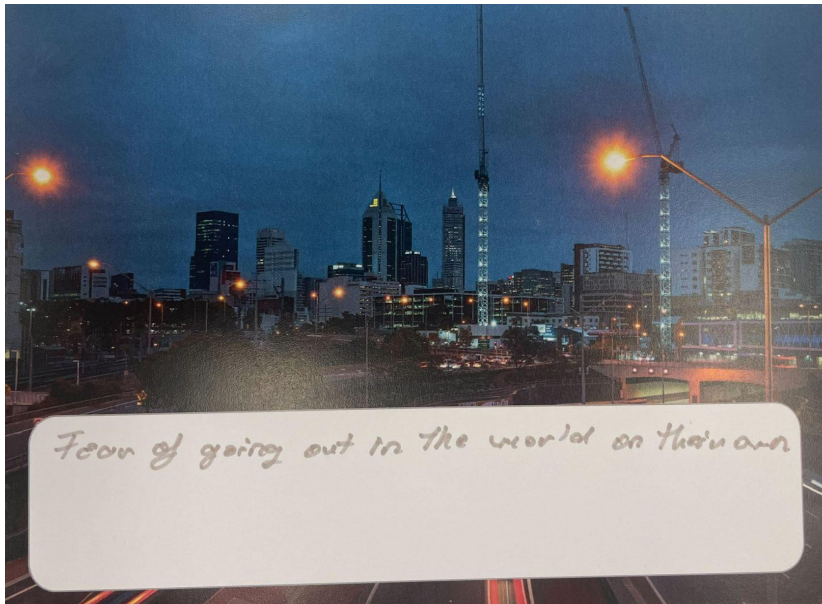
### **Practice "bright spots"**

We heard from young people and sector stakeholders that where young people are able to connect with youth workers from the Department or other Leaving Care Services, this can make a huge positive difference in young people's lives. These workers help young people navigate a complex system and, in many cases, proactively support young people to access services (e.g., accompanying them to appointments with Centrelink), and getting them priority access for housing and medical services. Some young people reported they only started to understand what leaving care planning was once they were allocated a youth worker.

*"My youth worker, she's amazing. She asks if I need anything. We talk all the time. Whatever I need help with, they do it. I needed a Police Clearance and WWCC to get a job - they said yep, and they just go and do it."*  
- Aboriginal young person with lived experience

# Insight 3

***The service landscape is complex, patchy and oversubscribed, and too often relies on young people finding their way to and through it***



*"Fear of going out in the world on their own."*  
- ACCO stakeholder



## **Jurisdictional learnings - England**

The National House Project is an innovative approach to housing provision for care leavers, supporting young people to create and own their own homes and live independent, connected, and fulfilling lives. Under the Project, young people leaving care are provided with an affordable house 'for life' (or for as long as they wish to have access), with the aim of being "settled before 18 in their forever home". While the housing are typically single units, care leavers are also grouped (10-14 people), who usually live within walking distance, and who come together to learn life skills, how to manage a tenancy and so on together. This addresses care leavers' practical needs (housing) and a supportive community of peers, within which they can build supportive relationships and have people to turn to. The National House Project formally supports care leavers over a period of 10 months, although the informal supports are ongoing. Care leavers can also return on an ongoing basis should their situation change.

*"The beginning of the project is housing, but the end of the project is community."*





# Insight 4

## The system can impose unreasonable expectations on 18 years olds to manage complex transitions

A person's 18th birthday has implications in terms of eligibility for some programs, which can commence, or cease (e.g. compulsory education, juvenile justice.) It also marks the time that many will start work and tertiary study, move out of home, learn to drive and start relationships.

As they age into adults, young people should have services that are responsive to these changing rights and responsibilities, and their developing maturity. However, young people reported that their 18th birthday didn't align with their readiness for these transitions - sometimes because they were ready and needed them earlier, but usually because they didn't feel ready by then.

While this is not uncommon among young people, the difference for young people from care is:

- The Department's legal status as the child's legal parent ends, which does not happen for children not in care; and
- Young people from care can find themselves having to navigate transitions with fewer and less established supports, because of frequent placement and worker changes or simply a failure to connect with the professionals they have been allocated to.

*"People who grow up with parents don't realise that we have no one to ask. They just get things without having to ask and we have to figure it out ourselves."*

- Young person with lived experience of care - "the one thing I'd like the government to know"

In terms of how this is experienced on the ground, young people and the people who work with them particularly report::

- Young people are trying to manage multiple complicated transitions at once - for example a change of housing, care planning, together with finishing Year 12 and learning to drive.
- It is unrealistic to expect an 17-18 year old to know what they would need at 20, 21, or 25 - and they may miss important things in care planning because they don't know what to ask for or don't understand the care planning process.

- Some carers of young people staying on also reported the Department cut them out of leaving care planning - because (those young people) "are now adults". Yet, they had important relevant information and perspectives.
- Several also reported that they felt the Department had a bias towards independence, regardless of whether young people were ready - which in some instances disrupted a stable, positive placement and/or put young people who couldn't manage in dangerous situations.
- Young people also said that despite everything they had faced, the system nonetheless expected them to be able to support themselves through work at 18 - which is not realistic, and ends up with many 'stuck'.

*"Transitions for young people to leave care should be skills-based rather than timeline-based: are they ready for the outside world?"*

- Foster carer

It is also important to note that there is a high level of disability among young people in care. In addition, trauma can impair reasoning and problem solving. This means that the expectations of care leavers at 18 - which we as a community acknowledge are greater than for other 18-year olds - are actually falling on young people who are not necessarily psychologically or developmentally ready.

### Jurisdictional learnings - Ontario



Currently, in care systems around the world, young people are forced to 'age out' of the system at an age of majority due to legislated cut-offs, leaving them unprepared and with little to no support transitioning to adulthood. As part of Ontario's multi-year Child Welfare Redesign Strategy, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services is developing a policy framework that is responsive to the needs of young people as they transition out of the care of societies into the community. In the first phase, the Ministry worked with first voice advocates to co-lead engagements with young people with lived experience, families and caregivers, service providers, advocates, and Indigenous partners to develop readiness indicators. These indicators will help young people, and the adults that support them, assess their readiness to leave care.



# Insight 5

## Care leavers get help from many sources, including informal avenues; this could be better recognised and supported

When young people talk about who was around and helping them at key moments in their care leaving process they talk about a range of informal and unpaid people, such as:

- Extended family of origin, including kinship carers
- Community, including Elders
- Foster carers (current or previous)
- Friends
- Trusted adults (e.g., teachers, sports coaches, friends' parents, mentors)

This seems to be particularly relevant to Aboriginal young people's journey, with Aboriginal community members routinely caring for young Aboriginal people who have left care; Aboriginal people other Aboriginal people 'knew where [the care leavers] were', and helped them find family and other connections.

Young people from CALD backgrounds talked about the importance of having mentors and other known people from their own cultural backgrounds so they could find out about their own country, religion and heritage; with those who had carers from other cultural backgrounds feeling 'caught between cultures and not belonging to either' without these connections.

Care leavers also get a lot of information "on the grapevine" - from other young people they know and other care leavers they come across.

This is closer to how young adults who are not care leavers get information and help, which tends to be from a range of adults around them who have a genuine interest in and care for the child's development.

*"My ex boyfriend's mum helped me talk to the Department to get me on Centrelink."*  
 - Young person with lived experience

*"We help each other out more than we are given help by anyone else - that's where I get help from."*  
 - Young person with lived experience

These natural connections have the potential to be genuine and lasting in the way that no paid worker can be. When the young person has the opportunity to choose their own advocate, it also promotes agency for young people in having had a choice and helped make the decision about who should represent them.

However, problems arise if:

- Young people get information from other young people because there aren't the right structures in place to get it from a department or service provider; or
- The people supporting them don't have all of the information - for example, if Aboriginal community members supporting care leavers don't know what they could help them apply for or access.



### Jurisdictional learnings - UK

Lifelong Links is a program developed and delivered by the Family Rights Group in the United Kingdom with the aim of building positive and lasting support networks for children who have lost their connections during their time in care. Lifelong Links work involves identifying and engaging relatives and other supportive adults connected to a child or young person with care experience, who are willing to make a life-long commitment to them. Through a family group conferencing process, the identified people meet with the young person and form a 'lifelong support plan' to ensure they continue to have relationships with important people their life. The local authority then integrates the support plan into the young person's official care or pathway plan.

By creating a positive, lasting support network, Lifelong Links can improve outcomes in many aspects of a young person's life. Just a few of the many possible benefits of increased stability include stronger relationships both in care and upon leaving care, a reinforced sense of identity and improved mental health and emotional wellbeing.

# Insight 6

## ***The system doesn't intervene until it's "too late"; missed early opportunities permanently impact young people's futures***

Service providers spoke of a system not well placed to intervene early to prevent and avoid harm.

According to legislation and policy, leaving care planning is expected to start at the age of 15. One of the most cited concerns from service providers and young people in this project is that this is "too late" - although in reality, many young people and service providers indicated that the leaving care transition did not start at 15 - but at 17, or even after 18. As such, some young people are not getting any opportunity for a staged and planned transition out of care, as it is not broached with them until it has already happened.

*"Getting assessments done can take a year. If things like speech etc. are delayed, they're not getting the help they need."*

- Agency stakeholder

There are many examples where the system had information that it did not act on until the care leaving process (or after), which had it been acted on earlier, would have benefited young people in care:

- Young people often try to reconnect with families when they leave care. Connection is not typically prioritised during placements - despite the Department often having access to information about children's family members, including other family in care. By the time young people try to reconnect with their families, years have been lost and they often find themselves alone in this reconnection process. This lack of support can have direct negative consequences on their physical and emotional wellbeing, particularly when young people return to unsafe environments.
- Interruptions to schooling as well as trauma for young people can result in low educational achievement. Despite regular NAPLAN and other testing, it is often only at the time people come to be preparing to leave care that literacy or numeracy issues are identified. At this point, it is hard or impossible to ever catch up.

- By the age of 15, many young people have had so many changes in placements that they are not well positioned to understand or accept a new service in their lives. Some young people's care experience has been so traumatic that they have already 'self-selected' out of care altogether - meaning they are never linked with post-care supports.
- Leaving care planning can be the catalyst for assessments such as of disabilities, but the window for meaningful treatment has often passed.

Each of these are examples of times when the system had the information of a problem or likely problem for years or decades, but did not act on it.

*"We're supposed to be an early intervention service, but more often we're a crisis service. If we had been there early, it wouldn't have gotten to this stage."*

- Agency stakeholder

*"The buildup of financial hardship causes a series of interrelated issues which drastically impact a young person and more often than not, could have been prevented if financial safety nets were implemented as a strategy for early prevention. This could promote healthier choice making, better education, stable housing/futures and less involvement of the department further down the road."*

- Young person with lived experience

### Practice "bright spots"

Early Education Officers currently operate in Armadale and Cannington. They work with two year olds to make referrals, identify and address any behavioural concerns and so on, so that children start school school-ready.

Several District Offices, such as Midland and Armadale, also offer therapeutic counselling services that can be accessed by children in care.

# Insight 7

## ***There is a lack of aspiration for young people leaving care across the system that adds to the stigma of being a care leaver***

Many young people leave the care system every year and go on to succeed in life - including those for whom care offered a positive and stable home, and those who manage to succeed despite all of the challenges they have faced.

However as a group, young people who have been taken into care start with the odds stacked against them. While not their fault, having been a child in care is typically described as something that is stigmatised and associated with shame.

Stakeholders consulted for this project talked about how this was reflected in a lack of ambition for children in care, manifested in examples such as:

- Little or no emphasis on schooling, let alone aspiration within education. The situation of children not being taken to school when there was a temporary placement was said to be common, with one stakeholder saying, "(school) is seen as not worth it for a few weeks, when the case manager might not know how long (the placement) is going to be.
- Encouraging young people to apply for social housing as the first housing option - despite the punishing workforce disincentives and social stigma that social housing can involve.
- Not talking about things like careers and jobs, supports such as Abstudy and scholarships, and options such as gap years or travel.
- Not providing any support for non-academic interests such as sports or music, nor for academic extension for gifted and talented students.

These are compounded by reports that employment agencies, which some said could lack empathy for care leavers' situations, and TAFEs/Unis that did not offer necessary supports to enter and succeed.

*"When we put young people on waitlists for social housing very young, we could give them the impression that's all we expect from them - it is important to consider other options, raise aspirations."*

- Agency stakeholder

*"Claiming Centrelink for the first time was like an automatic process. 'You're eligible for it, let's get you on it'. There's a risk of welfare dependency and it doesn't break any cycle".*

- Young person with lived experience



**See Recommendation 3, p. 57**

Personal issues affecting young people's ability to succeed include their own perception of what they should be aspiring to - children from families where people don't work or go to school are less likely to understand what can be gained from doing so, and less likely to have role models.

*"A lot of kids don't want to go on (education). They're now disengaging earlier - by 8, 10, 13, they've already disengaged, and there are no alternative options for them. They think, "everyone in my family left school at 15, I will too."*

- Stakeholder

There are also very real challenges to succeeding for children who have experienced trauma - for example difficulties in concentrating in class following trauma, and a lack of appropriate places and support to study at home. While the stigma of being a care leaver may impact on someone's willingness and ability to apply for jobs, education and volunteer positions for many years.

*"I felt judged by the school. It was a private Christian school. If you come from a broken family, it's a problem"*

- Young person with lived experience

## **Jurisdictional learnings - Scotland**



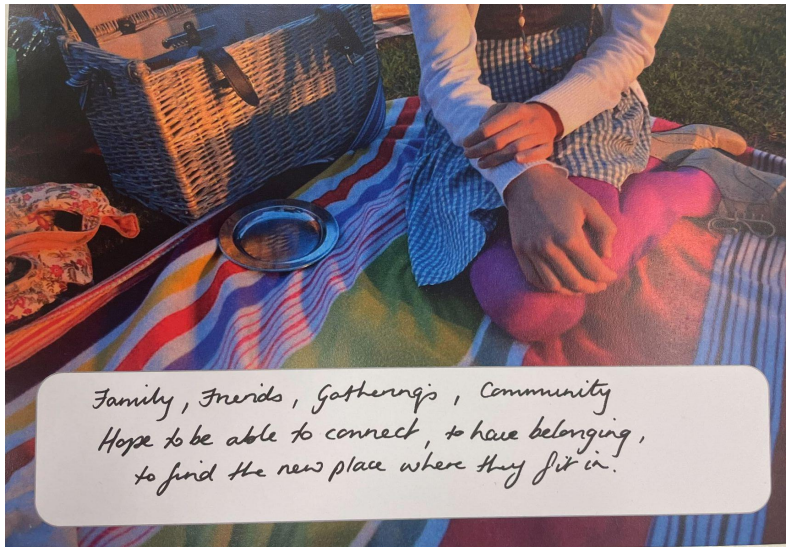
*Who Cares? Scotland* is a UK-wide organisation with a membership of over 3000 care-experienced people. *Who Cares?* has a strong advocacy arm, including independent advocacy, local peer groups, and a helpline. Young people walk alongside advocates and their peers to learn about their rights and the services available to them, and develop the confidence to be involved in decision-making.

*Who Cares?* also founded the Communities that Care initiative which uses community and whole-school approaches to educate Scotland about care through awareness raising activities in local areas, and create a variety of connection opportunities for young people to increase feelings of belonging.



# Insight 7

***There is a lack of aspiration for young people leaving care across the system that adds to the stigma of being a care leaver***



*Family, Friends, Gatherings, Community  
Hope to be able to connect, to have belonging,  
to find the new place where they fit in.*

*"Family, friends, gatherings, community. Hope to be able to connect, to have belonging, to find the new place where they fit in.."*

- ACCO stakeholder



## Practice "bright spots"

Mirrabooka District Office have held leaving care expos - bringing together TAFEs, universities, Abstudy, Centrelink, employers and so on to talk to care leavers about options and opportunities for their future.

*"I've taken year 7 kids out to show them about TAFE, uni, Abmusic. One boy I met 12, 15 years later, he still remembered me. He went to work on the mines. We don't have time to do things like this anymore."*

- Government Stakeholder

Follow the Dream (Polly Farmer Foundation) and the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience also raise young Aboriginal people's aspirations for schooling and post-school options.



# Insight 8

## **Different agencies don't act together to comprehensively support care leavers; there are opportunities to engage the whole community**

Despite the many success stories among care leavers, too many children taken into care end up leaving without the skills, resources and knowledge they need to succeed as adults. The human costs of this can be enormous. In addition, it often translates into chronic and expensive interactions with services including mental health, AoD, health and justice. There are persistent failures to intervene early, resulting in avoidable harm to care leavers and costs to us all.

The Department has statutory responsibilities for children and young people in care, however much of what the Department needs to provide for these young people - in terms of housing, income support, health, employment, and well-being - relies on other agencies.

Stakeholders told us that agencies were not generally good at 'joining up' around young people's needs, particularly in terms of:

- Housing - the lack of affordable and available housing was probably the biggest single issue mentioned by stakeholders. This is amplified in regional and rural areas with the Pilbara stakeholders reporting significant concerns in this area.
- Mental health services and other human services agencies - which were reported to be under resourced relative to needs, with long waiting lists and a lack of qualified staff
- Schooling - with young people's schooling regularly suffering as they are moved from place to place, including into schools that - as reported by stakeholders - are not operating in a trauma-informed way that responds to the needs of these children. Young people also said their status as a child in care caused bullying and stigma.
- Continuing responsibilities through periods of detention. Currently, detention was said by some to be seen as an opportunity for DoC to step away - as one agency worker said: *"Once they're in detention - they don't get attention - because, well, they're safe. We know where they are. We don't have to house them now."* Yet this substantially decreases the ability of a young person to change their behaviour.

*"Interconnectedness of so many issues- for example so many young people don't attend school, so that impacts on future opportunities, homelessness, AOD use etc."*  
- Agency stakeholder

Certain agencies were also criticised or punitive, stigmatising or un-empathetic responses to care leavers, including Centrelink, employment agencies and police social workers.

A number of protocols do or have existed to support more joined up service provision - including MoUs with the Departments of Health and Education as well as a Rapid Response Protocol, although these do not appear to be related to specific activities or initiatives at the present time.

There are broader opportunities, too, to bring the whole community together around supporting young people to succeed. Banks, real estate agencies, gyms, local government (libraries, gyms, rec centres), and potential employers are examples of some community actors who could be engaged in the effort to better support young people leaving care; experience from elsewhere offers some examples of this in practice.

### Practice "bright spots"



*"There are bright spots - where the schools are really trauma informed, and it's about what's good for the child, not the school. It starts with the Deputy Head saying what programs and plans are there, not 'we are looking at expulsion here'. One girl, it was about what her rewards could be - art, basketball. You can tell, from where the meeting is held - somewhere outside, somewhere not threatening - to who's involved - the carers, the child (if appropriate), the psych. If they involve the child, how they speak to the child. It's strengths based - what works? Rather than what are the punishments. And what happens? The child doesn't get expelled."*

- Government stakeholder.

The Department has been proactively working to get care leavers priority access to social housing, instigating practices such as automatic enrolment on waiting lists that don't rely on young people finding out and understanding what they need to do.

# Insight 8

***Different agencies don't act together to comprehensively support care leavers; there are opportunities to engage the whole community in this***

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## **Jurisdictional learnings - UK**

A policy commitment in the United Kingdom strengthening of the culture of corporate parenting through introduction of a Care Leaver Covenant. The Covenant is a national inclusion program built upon a promise made by the private, public, and voluntary sectors to provide support for care leavers aged 16-25 to help them to live independently. This support is focused in five key areas - independent living, education, employment, and training, safety and security, mental and physical health, and finance.

Each organisation that commits to the Care Leaver Covenant declares a support package to care leavers that is tailored to its expertise, experience, and environment. These packages range from opportunities to enter the workforce in a variety of sectors through internships or traineeships, additional support such as one-to-one mentoring or guidance on various aspects of their lives such as finance or career and education prospects, involvement in specific activities and events that inspire their personal interest or broaden their horizons including access to sport, leisure, or cultural activities, as well as retail discounts.



## **Jurisdictional learnings - Scotland**

In 2019, the Scottish government committed to reforming the care system and improving available support for young people once they transition out of care. Luckily for Scotland's youth, the commitment has been real. Since then, there has been a wave of policy changes, all designed to better support care leavers.

In March 2022, the Scottish Government announced its multi-agency 'Keeping the Promise' Implementation Plan - "Keeping the Promise requires us to join up across our Government policies and actions and to work with our partners to bring transformational change." The development of the Plan involved actors across and throughout the care system, including the wide range agencies that commission and operate it. Through working together on a single mandate and policy priority, cross-governmental and sector collaboration has been strengthened and the voices of young people with lived experience continue to be held at the centre. This approach has also reduced siloed working through identification of the various components of the sector that must work together to reform the system.

# Insight 9

**Connection to culture, land and Country continue to be severed for Aboriginal children who enter care, continuing and exacerbating the damage done to Aboriginal people in the name of protecting children. This leaves many Aboriginal care leavers with nowhere to turn for help.**

More than half of all young people in care are Aboriginal in Western Australia.

Aboriginal young people, families and communities have been and continue to be uniquely and specifically impacted by the practices adopted by past and present governments in the name of protecting children, but which has often had more to do with systemic and institutionalised racism. The response needs to be an Aboriginal-led one involving healing, and restorative justice.

Below are presented some of the views expressed by stakeholders consulted for this project regarding the specific and unique issues affecting Aboriginal care leavers, noting that the majority of those who provided these views were not Aboriginal.

- ▶ Young Aboriginal people leaving care tend to seek to return to their family and community. While this was common among most care leavers, Aboriginal care leavers are more likely to be returning to communities steeped in the outcomes of entrenched and institutionalised racism, such as overcrowding, violence, drug use, and poverty.
- ▶ Aboriginal people were less inclined to get involved as formal carers (foster / kin) for Aboriginal young people due to fear and distrust of the Department, the result of generations of negative experiences.

*“Due to colonisation and oppressive policies, in Aboriginal peoples’ collective memory, the Department of Communities are not trusted.”*  
- ACCO stakeholder

- ▶ Aboriginal children and young people are finding their way to informal carers in the community. Such carers are likely to be providing care to many other children and young people in the community at the same time, and therefore may be stretched in doing so.

- ▶ The system is predominantly created and staffed by non-Aboriginal people and is not likely to be experienced as culturally safe. Many people working in the system do not have deep personal understanding of what is meaningful and important to Aboriginal people, such as culture and Country.
- ▶ Stakeholders reported that cultural needs were less prioritised in leaving care planning than ‘practical things’ - as one stakeholder said, ‘we are talking about healing the wounds of the past but (the Department’s) priority is a computer”.
- ▶ Aboriginal people are still being removed from country in the name of child protection. This has cultural and personal impacts that non-Aboriginal people cannot comprehend. Aboriginal young people in care who have been removed from their Country by the government are being denied funds to travel to remain connected to family and culture. This is reminiscent of the limitations on the movement of Aboriginal people that Aboriginal people and communities were subject to throughout history.

*“People are moved and are prevented from going back to country - I’m not sure why. We wanted a couple of hundred dollars for a young person in care to visit family in Geraldton. The Department said no.”*  
- ACCO stakeholder

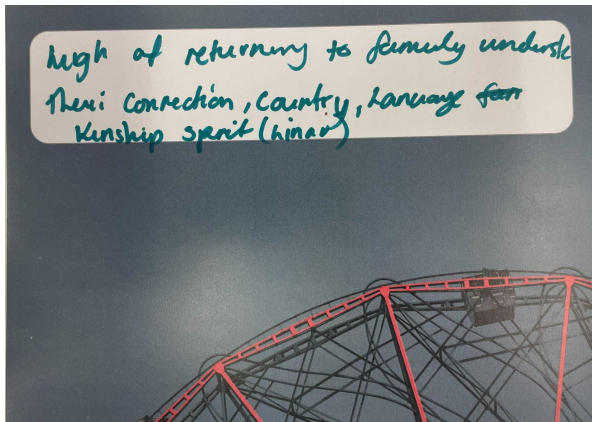
- ▶ This also means Aboriginal care leavers seek to travel to a different region when they leave care, in the process of returning to country and family. The current Departmental system struggles to manage this, and care leavers can end up being referred back and forth across districts. Again this affects all young people who move regions, but as Aboriginal people are more likely to have been removed from their region, they are disproportionately impacted.

*“Why are they still removing children from their land? They try to go back - they don’t talk how they talk, they don’t act how they act. They can’t talk to their grannies, their mothers.”*  
- ACCO stakeholder



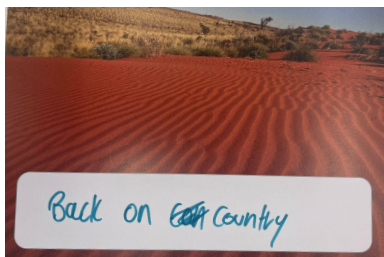
# Insight 9

**Connection to culture, land and Country continue to be severed for Aboriginal children who enter care, continuing and exacerbating the damage done to Aboriginal people in the name of protecting children. This leaves many Aboriginal care leavers with nowhere to turn for help.**



High of returning to family understand  
their connection, country, language from  
kinship spirit (hinau)

*"High of returning to family, understanding their connection, country, language, kinship, spirit."*  
- ACCO stakeholder



Back on ~~Earth~~ Country

*"Back on Country."*  
- ACCO stakeholder

## Practice "bright spots"



Aboriginal Practice Leads (APLs) play a vital role in a system that predominantly provides services to Aboriginal families and communities, but is predominantly staffed by people who are not Aboriginal. APLs are embedded in their communities, and able to make a difference in terms of supporting Aboriginal people in care because of their skills knowledge and experience, as well as their own family connections and local knowledge. APLs typically work beyond their job description because of their professional and personal commitments to the work, making burnout and compassion fatigue a real risk.

## Jurisdictional learnings



In Victoria, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) are empowered to lead the response to child protection reports regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, with authorities delegating duties of care and case management. These changes follow a first stage of legislative reforms – A second stage is likely to further enable Aboriginal agencies to exercise direct control over decisions regarding the best interests of Aboriginal children. A Transitioning Aboriginal Children Team has been established within the Department to assist with the transfer of duties to ACCO's and ensure the development of a transparent and sustainable state-wide framework.

This change is an important step in achieving self-determination for Aboriginal communities and aims to provide better outcomes for all Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care. Aboriginal children who are cared for by an ACCO have a greater connection to culture, which can lead to better health and wellbeing outcomes, and ultimately reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the care system.



# Insight 10

## **Young people with disabilities are underdiagnosed, undersupported and sometimes forced to choose between getting supports or having agency.**

Stakeholders consistently report a high level of disability among the population of young people in care, and care leavers.

Department statistics suggest that around 20% of children aged 15-17 in care have a disability (Department of Communities, 30 September 2022 figures), around double the WA rate of disability for this age group.

There is likely to be a low-end estimate because:

- Many young people have never had a formal diagnostic process, with some issues attributed to trauma rather than formally assessed
- For many young people in care it is difficult to gather the evidence required for assessments and diagnosis, especially when young people are moving frequently between placements (which, we were told, can often be due to dysregulated behaviours resulting from undiagnosed and unsupported disabilities); and
- The background or family history that would support some diagnoses is sometimes not available. One of the requirements for a FASD diagnosis is confirmation of alcohol consumption in pregnancy, for example.

*“Early, accurate assessment is key, as diagnosis is a barrier or gateway to a lot of necessary supports.”*

- Agency stakeholder

The impact a person’s disability has on their life can be significantly reduced through early diagnosis and treatment. It was routinely reported that some disabilities are going undiagnosed and untreated until 18 or even later. This is resulting in some people leaving care with a level of disability that could have been reduced and/or without an adequate level of support for their disability.

The NDIS provides important supports, but stakeholders routinely said they didn’t have the right information or training to navigate it, while young people reported not being informed about their rights and entitlements.

An important challenge to access the NDIS is the significant evidence gathering that is required, which takes time, and often hasn’t been done. Delays and gaps are more likely when placements are unstable, when young people are transient, or when it is not prioritised.

We also heard that young people with a disability leaving care are routinely placed into legal guardianship and trustee arrangements which, for many young people, unduly limit their agency and can rob them of opportunities to develop crucial social networks and independent living skills (for example, managing personal finances) as they move into adulthood.

Even in cases where guardianship and trustee arrangement are appropriate, it was reported that guardian and trustee roles are filled by “professional strangers” without a trusted relationship with the child, and that these arrangements are currently framed, understood, and carried out on the basis of risk management, rather than being focused on providing and advocating for the child’s needs.

Further, stakeholders reported that the same evidence required of them to get access to funding and support for young people with disabilities had later been used as evidence of the same young person’s lack of capacity, and so to justify ongoing guardianship and trustee arrangements; young people with disabilities thus find themselves having to choose between funding and support on the one hand, and agency on the other.

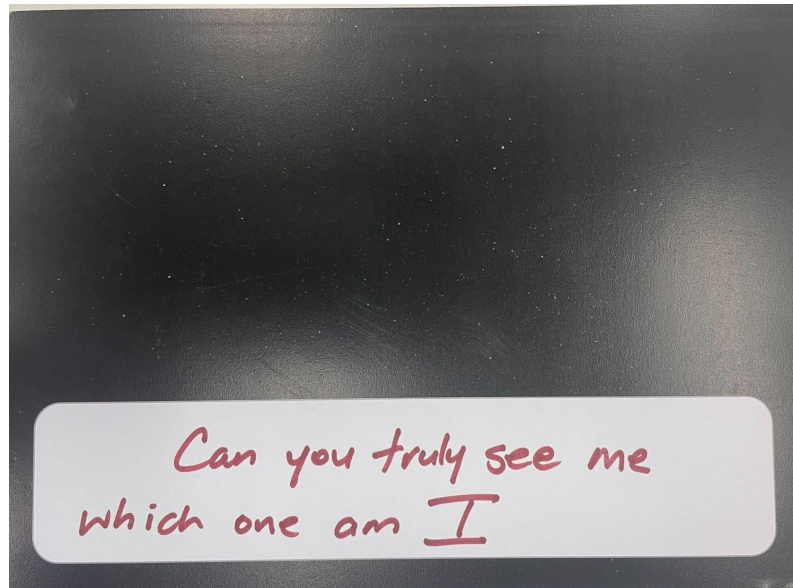
*“Significant evidence-gathering needs to happen before assessment, which is very difficult to do when the young person’s placement or location isn’t stable - sometimes Banksia Hill is the only place they’re at for long enough to get an assessment done.”*

- Stakeholder

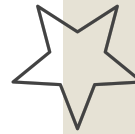
In addition, the experiences that many young people have had - before being taken into care as well as in the care system - may have resulted in trauma responses that impact their ability to function, to problem solve and to logically work through issues. While not necessarily a disability, functioning could sometimes improve through counselling and other therapies - again, with the maximum level of improvement linked to intervening early. We did not hear that this was broadly understood or routinely considered.

# Insight 10

***Young people with disabilities are underdiagnosed, undersupported, and sometimes forced to choose between getting supports or having agency.***



*"Can you truly see me? Which one am I?"*  
- ACCO stakeholder



## **Practice "bright spots"**

### ***NDIS Project Officer in a District Office***

As part of a pilot started in April 2022, a NDIS Project Officer was appointed in Albany District Office to support children, parents and carers with an open case with Child Protection and Family Support to navigate the NDIS system, including young people in care. The NDIS Project Officer provides advice to her colleagues in the Care Teams on NDIS and legal guardianships, and assists them with NDIS assessments. This role was reported by case workers to be a very valuable support in helping them better meet the needs of the young people they work with. We haven't heard of this role in other District Offices consulted for this project.

### ***Regional Intensive Support coordinators employed by the Department***

Regional Intensive Support (RIS) coordinators, employed by the Department, work with people with disabilities, and are specifically available to support young people with disabilities who are in or leaving care. They engage in planning, choosing and accessing supports to coordinate complex support needs, with a manager tasked with supporting RIS coordinators to resolve strategic and operational barriers and blockages.

*"The RISCs, they know all about NDIS (it's a complicated program), and they bring together all the stakeholders. They are really valuable - their knowledge of the system. They work across districts."*  
- Government stakeholder

### ***Worker-led initiatives***

The project also heard about an officer within the Department Head Office using a 'by-name' list of all young people with disabilities who were leaving care who followed up with each young person and their case manager as they approached care leaving age to make sure they had access to the supports required.

### ***Independent advocacy***

Developmental Disability WA play a valuable role in providing independent advocacy for young people with disabilities, including those in the care system, despite limited capacity. Access to an advocate independent from the Department is crucial for young people who often have limited agency and for whom many decisions about their lives and their transitions out of care are made on their behalf.



# Insight 11

## Care leavers with children are not getting what they need to be well, to succeed, and to be good parents.

Stakeholders reported that having a child can be a catalyst for positive changes in young people's lives, with some stakeholders saying having a child settled a young person and increased their engagement in support services.

*"If the young person has a baby - then engagement increases, they settle down."*  
- Agency stakeholder

However, the background of removal and being in care can also give rise to real fears from young people about having their own children taken away. This fear - based on the reality that parents who have been in care are up to ten times more likely to have involvement with child protection for their own children - leads young parents to avoid seeking help they need - including help they need to keep their children and themselves safe. These fears are resulting in some young parents staying in violent or unsafe relationships rather than seeking help to leave.

*"Young parents live in fear: they won't say if they have no food or no nappies because they are scared the Department will come and take their child"*  
- Youth worker

Young people with children overall reported many of the same problems that other young people and care leavers did, but the impact of these can be more significant for young parents. For example:

- Lack of support from their own families - with broken or tenuous connections (due to being taken into care and the circumstances that led to removal) leaving them to be parents without any family support.
- Lack of parenting preparation and support - with many young people not having had parenting positively modelled to them previously, and therefore feeling unprepared as they become parents themselves.
- Lack of housing - while this was commonly reported by many people, young parents have even fewer choices as they aren't able to stay in many residential care or youth accommodation services.
- Poor access to mainstream services due to stigma/judgement - where parenting services or supports do exist - such as universal playgroups - young parents did not feel comfortable or welcome.

- Lack of affordable child care options - particularly impacting single parents, including their education and career opportunities
- Mental health issues - including PTSD, which can be triggered/re-triggered on childbirth, and post-natal depression
- Family and Domestic Violence - is more likely due to a lack of positive modelling in their own childhood and a lack of support regarding healthy relationships as they grew up
- Other issues such as not having transport, not having budgeting skills, not knowing how to manage tenancies - the impact of these issues can be greater for young parents, both because of the threat that failures may result in them losing their children.

*"He was the first person who paid attention to me so I took it."*

- Young person with lived experience, referring to an abusive partner she starting dating at 16

Overall, it appears the system is not well set up to support young parents making a genuine effort, as evidenced by the following story from a stakeholder:

*A young mother was supported by DoC to leave a FDV relationship and break the cycle of violence, with DoC paying for daycare. This mother managed to find a job, however because of the positive changes she'd made, DoC withdrew their support and stopped paying for child care, so the mother could no longer accept the job. The mother told her youth worker: "I'll get him to come punch me and then they'll pay for daycare".*



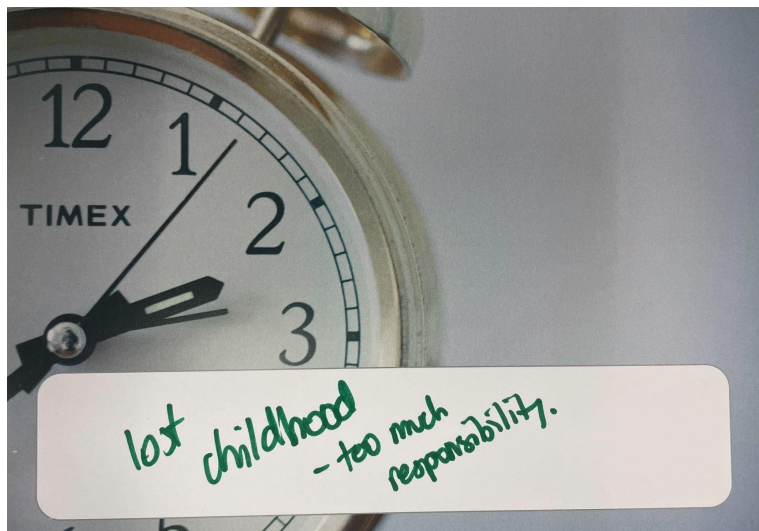
### Practice "bright spots"

Some service providers are providing wrap around support to young parents who have left care in Perth metro area, although their reach is limited. For example, Salvation Army Transitional Support Service identified the high number of young parents in their cohort of care leavers and as a result have a youth worker dedicated to supporting these young parents, recognising they have specific needs. Anglicare WA have a Youth Parents Support Service available for young people at risk under 25, which includes a good number of care leavers. Both these services facilitate playgroups so these young parents can share their experiences, which often results in them supporting each other. Youth workers also connect young parents with relevant agencies, for example by occasionally inviting external agencies (e.g., child health nurse, TAFE) to meet the young people they support in their space.



# Insight 11

**Care leavers with children are not getting what they need to be well, to succeed, and to be good parents.**



*"Lost childhood - too much responsibility."*  
- Young person with lived experience



## **Jurisdictional learnings - Victoria**

Cradle to Kinder is a Victorian early intervention program, specialising in the needs of young pregnant women, Aboriginal parents, and parents who have been in out-of-home-care. The program delivers intensive support to young women until their child turns five. The long-term nature of the program, as well as the connection with other community services, the availability of brokerage funds, and the access to peer support are the program's core aspects. Cradle to Kinder's Aboriginal program is specifically tailored to provide a culturally competent service for Aboriginal families. An evaluation completed in 2017 found that the program has the potential to change the cycle of intergenerational vulnerability by empowering parents to build a solid foundation for their families' futures.

# Insight 12

**Home Stretch is a vital innovation. It does not replace the need to address the identified gaps for care leavers.**

In the future, Home Stretch WA will be providing some young people leaving care with support until the age of 21. Home Stretch is a vital addition to the existing service system as it will fill many of the important gaps identified in this report, and make a significant difference to young care leavers who opt-in to the program.

However, Home Stretch is additional to, not instead of, the Department’s obligations to young people. As noted, these are currently not consistently nor comprehensively met.

Over the coming years, the vast majority of care leavers will not be eligible for Home Stretch and will need to be supported through existing services - which, as suggested here - are not well placed or resourced to fulfil their responsibilities.

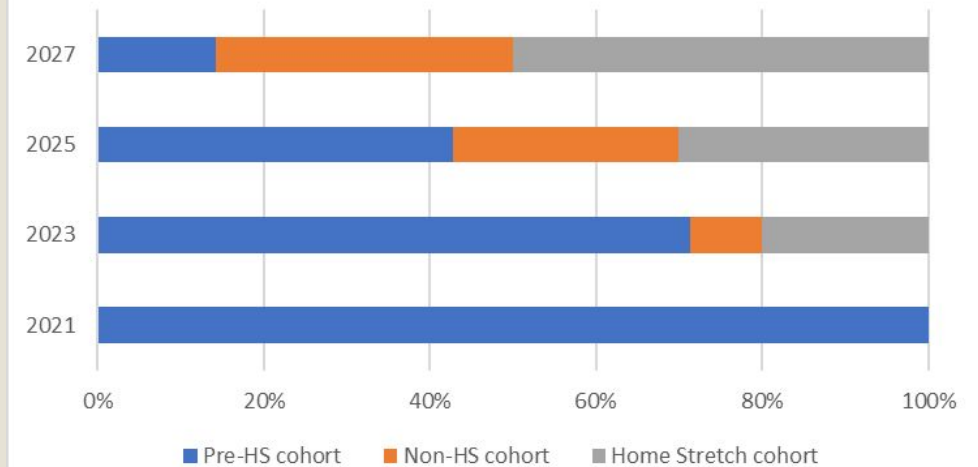
It is exigent on the Department to improve its current leaving care processes and procedures so that care leavers get the financial, practical and social supports they need to transition out of care.

This project found and acknowledges workforce issues across the sector, as well as other challenges, such as finding housing. It will take work to resolve these, as well as resolving issues such as how Home Stretch will coordinate with existing services.

In the longer term, Home Stretch should reduce the call on resources across government from care leavers between the ages of 18 and 21. However, it cannot be used as an excuse to not provide the resources care leavers need now.

*“Home Stretch is exciting but it depends on whether we can find coaches.”*  
- Regional District Office worker

Program eligibility of care leavers



*This figure shows a projected breakdown of care leavers by program eligibility for the coming period. In July 2021, 100% of young people leaving care (n~1890) were eligible for only Department of Communities or Leaving Care Services, as Home Stretch had not commenced.*

*By July 2023, we estimate that around 20% of care leavers will be accessing Home Stretch; meaning that 80% of care leavers will still rely on Departmental post-care or Leaving Care Services (non-Home Stretch) services. By 2027, around 50% of care leavers will still be relying only on non-Home Stretch services.*

*Source: IU estimates from figures provided by Department of Communities; assumes 70% take up rate of Home Stretch among eligible care leaving population.*

# Insight 12

**Home Stretch is a vital innovation. It does not replace the need to address the identified gaps for care leavers.**



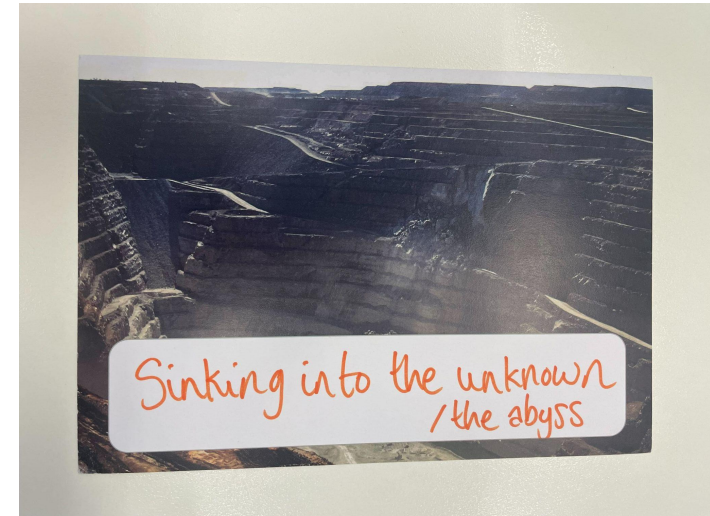
## Jurisdictional learnings

The experience of other jurisdictions who have gone ahead in these type of reforms provides some cautions.

Stakeholders from Victoria reported that one of the greatest challenges in implementing Home Stretch was to ensure the Department did not see the implementation of Home Stretch as an opportunity to opt out of or reduce the leaving care and post-care responsibilities they retain.

Stakeholders from New Zealand cautioned that workforce shortages and the ability of agencies to shift funding between programs ended up compromising the program.

Stakeholders from the United Kingdom said that despite a common mandate, service quality across the country differed substantially between providers.



*"Sinking into the unknown - the abyss."*  
- ACCO stakeholder

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# **Recommendations**

# Recommendations

Recognising the difference that effective leaving care planning and the provision of good leaving care and post care supports can make for care leavers, we recommend that the Department:

## 1 **Consistently and without exception delivers timely, accountable, evidence-informed and individualised care leaving and post care services in all districts.**

Policies and procedures set out what care leavers must be provided with. There are pockets of good practice where young people are provided with support and help in line with - and at times in excess of - this. Meeting standards - and aiming to exceed them - should be the rule, rather than the exception.

We recommend that every district have a dedicated leaving care team, and every region (at least) have a dedicated post-care team. Without these resources, it seems unlikely that current DoC responsibilities will be met.

Overall, given the diversity of experiences across districts, it is likely that a coordinated effort across the Department will be necessary to achieve a consistent approach to leaving care that delivers what is set out in policy.

*"Having a case worker from DCP that responds to emails."* - Response from a young person with lived experience when asked how support could be improved.

## 2 **Ensures that support is pro-actively and repeatedly offered to care leavers to flexibly respond to young people's needs.**

Steps forward, backward and sideways are all normal and expected in the transition between youth and adulthood. Some young people won't be ready to transition into independence at 18. Some young people will choose not to engage with services. This should never be an excuse for the service system to stop trying to connect with care leavers.

This raises questions such as:

- How can we deliver a person-centred approach based around a young person's needs and readiness, not program offerings?
- How can we find and reconnect with young people who have left without leaving care planning, for example?
- Can we involve peers - other young people from care - to reduce stigma and judgement?
- How can we respond flexibly to individual needs, across a disparate and disjointed service system?
- How can services effectively reach out to young people, rather than expecting young people to know or find them?

*"Being offered help at the right time rather than having to ask for help."* - Response from a young person with lived experience when asked how support could be improved.

## 3 **Coordinates work across (and outside of) government to proactively identify and address young people's needs before, during and after leaving care.**

The Department should play the key role in coordinating cross-agency efforts. The following are suggested:

- All children to have access to a full range of assessments in early childhood, or soon after entering care
- Emphasis on proactive referral to a wide range of therapeutic supports
- Proactive case coordination/case conferencing to bring together front-line workers around a young person's aspirations, ramping up through the care leaving processes
- Greater emphasis on education and career options for young people in care - starting from primary school, with increased focus through the early years of high school.
- Proactive intervention at the first indication of slippage against educational milestones, such as NAPLAN testing.

*"There's a rapid response protocol - the MoUs are in place. What's missing is the work to operationalise it, to implement it properly."* - Response from an agency stakeholder when asked how support could be improved.



# Recommendations

Particularly, to better support young care leavers with specific needs, we recommend the following:

## 4 **Prioritise cultural safety for all children in care, particularly Aboriginal children in care.**

The child protection system continues to be designed and staffed in large part by non-Aboriginal people, many of whom do not understand, prioritise or respond to the unique needs of Aboriginal children and families.

There is an urgent need for the Department to work with organisations to increase:

- The number of Aboriginal staff working in the system, who can provide an appropriate and safe response to Aboriginal children in care;
- The amount and significance of the involvement of Aboriginal agencies (ACCOs) in supporting children before, during and after leaving care;
- The level of whole of family and whole of community support offered to families in the child protection system to enable them to actively support young people to return to community and Country after leaving care.

*"Why are they still removing children from their land? They try to go back - they don't talk how they talk, they don't act how they act. They can't talk to their grannies, their mothers."* - ACCO agency stakeholder

## 5 **Recognise and adequately respond to the level, types and impact of disability for care leavers.**

The evidence gathered for this project suggests that the level and types of disabilities that care leavers have is not properly understood or acted on, and that this has a detrimental impact on people's future life chances.

The response should include:

- Consistent early assessment of a child's development from the time they enter care
- Effective referrals to early intervention services in the event of issues
- Coordinated and early approach to NDIS, led by specialised professionals - the NDIS is too complicated to be left to parents, carers, or non-specialists.
- Effective referrals to other professionals at the earliest opportunity - such as trauma counselling, mental health services.

*"Talk to me about what I want, let me choose - they just do stuff."* - Young person with a disability with lived experience.

## 6 **Offer a dedicated support for young parents to build wellness, achieve goals, and be excellent parents**

People who have been in care who are pregnant or have their own children face unique challenges and risks. Given the prevalence of intergenerational involvement in child protection, supporting these young people to be the best parents they can be also offers a unique opportunity to intervene at the right time to break the cycle.

Young parents can be great parents - but they need more help than is available. They need and deserve places that offer trusted, supportive and non-judgemental advice and tangible help with the practical issues they have - which include healthy relationships, housing, financial support, help to study and work, as well as parenting advice and support. Importantly, this may have to be separate to government, due to the fears of many in this group have about government-involved services.

*"Support to help get ready and prepare to be a mum."* - Response from a young person with lived experience when asked how support could be improved.



# Related considerations

We highlight a key issue that was consistently raised and which may require additional attention across the leaving care system:

***Recognise and effectively respond to the challenges for young people of securing and maintaining housing, as the cornerstone of a successful transition to independent adult living.***

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We heard over and over the difficulties of finding housing in the current market, and that care leavers are being forced into exploitative and unsafe environments because they can't find housing.

Where young people had been supported to access social housing, they often said it was not suitable for their situation (poorly located, isolated, not well served by public transport). They frequently reported violence from neighbours.

There is little of more importance to a successful transition to independence than a safe, affordable and stable house.

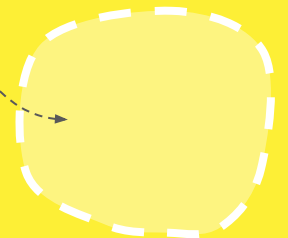
We acknowledge that this is a complicated issue which to a large extent lies outside of the control of any one agency, however we recommend it be noted as a critical and complex issue that is affecting many young people.

*"I was told I had housing and everything but it turned out nothing had been sorted. They told me they would fix it but they didn't. DCP told me I was on the housing list but I wasn't."* - Young person with a disability with lived experience.

***Specific recommendations, detailed by age, relating to these main points have been provided as an appendix (p. 75 - 82).***

# Jurisdictional scan

*Click on the yellow bubbles to see the relevant insight.*



# Ontario, Canada

With approximately 11,700 children and young people under state guardianship, Ontario has the highest numbers of children in care of all Canadian provinces and territories. Each year over 1,000 young people transition out of the system, for many, this transition and the experience of care creates lifelong adverse outcomes and challenges. Since there is no universally accepted definition, the interpretation of how to 'extend care' varies from country to country. In Canada, greater value has been placed on aftercare support, which is established until the age of 25-29, rather than lengthening care placements.

## Legislative and Extended Care Context

Canada is one of a small number of countries that do not have an overarching national legislative framework that safeguards the leaving care system. Instead, the experiences of young people transitioning out of care are dictated solely by provincial or territorial policies and programs. In Ontario, child protection services are deliverable until the age of 18. This is based on updated legislated age parameters in the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act 2017*, which repealed the original *1984 Child and Family Services Act*. Previously, access to child protection services was limited to children and youth under 16, unless the child was already protected under a court order.

To ensure a more seamless transition, the Act instated two new programs; for young people aged 16-17 who had already terminated their care, the *Renewed Youth Supports Program* would allow them to continue receiving support until 18 through a voluntary agreement; and for young people aged 16-17 who were not formerly in care but required child protective services due to their evolving living situation, they could now enter an agreement called the *Voluntary Youth Services Agreement* and access the full range of services including out-of-home placement.

There are options within the system for extending care placements on a funded basis beyond the age of 18. The *Stay Home for School* program provides funding to caregivers so they can continue to provide a placement for the additional time it takes a young person to complete high school.

## Moratorium of Youth Aging Out of Care

In March 2020, the Ontario Government passed the *Moratorium of Youth Aging Out of Care* (Moratorium) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the exacerbated difficulties for young people in care. This Moratorium ensured that during the pandemic, no young people would age out of guardianship and the supports and services they were entitled to and into homelessness, unemployment, and uncertainty. The Moratorium has been extended until March 31, 2023, coinciding with the development and implementation of the *Child Welfare Redesign Project*.

## Child Welfare Redesign Project

In July 2020, the Government announced plans for redesigning the child welfare system to focus on strengthening families, community-based prevention and early intervention services, and connections to family, communities, and culture. Co-led by the Ontario Children's Advancement Coalition and Youth in Care Canada, the project is built on five strategic pillars:

1. *Child, youth, family and community wellbeing - Providing higher quality, culturally appropriate and responsive community-based services, with a focus on prevention and early intervention;*
2. *Quality of care - Seeking to improve the quality of residential care provided to children and youth;*
3. *Strengthening youth supports - Ensuring children, youth and families have a strong voice in decisions about their care. It also includes supporting children and youth to succeed at school and graduate with their peers, setting them up for future success at work and in adulthood;*
4. *Improving stability and permanency - Developing permanent, stable connections and supports for children and youth through family-based placements such as adoption, legal custody, customary care and kinship service; and*
5. *System accountability and sustainability - Creating a more efficient and effective child welfare system, one that is financially sustainable.*

Despite the extensive aftercare support available, young people in Ontario still do not feel developmentally prepared to live independently once they leave care and routinely fall into gaps in access to housing, social support networks, employment, and in the utilisation of basic life skills. Currently, Ontario uses a framework based on arbitrary age indicators to mandate legislated cut-offs. The Government has recognised their shortcomings and, through the Redesign Project, are establishing a new readiness framework that will see young people transition out of care when they feel prepared and set them up for success. This framework is currently being developed through a co-design process, engaging youth and families with lived experience and other key stakeholders such as service providers, advocates, and Indigenous partners to develop assessable readiness indicators such as stable housing or education level.

*Recognising young people's varying levels of development, readiness indicators support young people to leave care when they are ready, setting them up for successful transitions out of care (p.41).*

## Aftercare supports

Ontario offers the longest period of support in Canada, providing various services, programs, and aftercare support until the age of 29.

The *Continued Care and Supports for Youth (CCSY)* program provides financial support of \$850CAD a month to young people aged between 18 and 21 for renewable periods of up to 12 months. The CCSY was introduced in 2013, replacing the previous *Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM)* program, increasing the Young people that participate in this program must create and maintain a transition plan that reflects their individual needs and goals in the following areas - social support network, housing, health, education, or employment, identity, and life management skills, and personal development. financial support available and including connection to case workers.

The *Child, Youth and Family Services Act* places a legislative mandate on children's aid societies to offer CCSY to all eligible youth when they turn 18. A cost-benefit analysis completed in 2012 concluded that for every Canadian dollar spent through the ECM program and other financial supports to the age of 25, Ontario saves or earns an estimated CAD\$1.36 over the working lifetime of a person.. However, for young people, this benefit is largely insufficient. The current amount provides little financial security for young people, especially considering the rising costs of living. When a care leaver turns 21, the abrupt cessation of CCSY often results in them transitioning to a different form of government income support that continues into adulthood - as high as 57% in Ontario.

Launched in 2014 and funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, the Aftercare Benefits Initiative (ABI) is a comprehensive health and dental benefits program for former youth in care. For young adults aged between 21 and 24, the initiative provides a broad range of benefit coverage including prescription drug, dental, vision, and extended health benefits. However, the majority of these supports are not available once a young person turns 24, with the exception of life skill supports, therapy, and counselling which continue up to the age of 29. Young people are able to select their own health care providers - with counselling offered through a preselect network - and submit claims for visits to benefits providers determined in their ABI plan.

There are additional financial support programs for former youth in care entering post-secondary education and training. During care, young people are required to establish a Registered Education Savings Plan that can be accessed to support education-related expenses once they leave care and enrol in an eligible course or program.

The Living and Learning Grant funded by the Ontario Student Assistance Program that provides additional funding of up to CAD\$6,000 per academic year for a maximum of 4 years. The Provincial Tuition Fee Waiver Program waves tuition and any other mandatory fees for former young people in care of any age who enter a post-secondary educational institution for full or part time study. Programs like this have found that low expectations and barriers to enrolment hinder care leavers educational attainment. Targeted outreach by Universities and University partners, paired with the financial support, can boost care leavers successful transition to higher education.

Care leavers often lack the social and support networks that young people rely on to guide them into adulthood. Mentoring has become an increasingly common intervention, connecting young people to these networks and providing them with a go-to person for advice. Ontario is currently funding Big Steps to Success, a national project to develop and implement a dedicated mentorship approach for children in care. Between the ages of 16 to 24, care leavers can access the Youth in Transition Worker program through local community agencies. The aim of the program is to ensure youth aged 16 to 24 are connected to supports and community services that will help secure stable housing, educational resources, employment services, and life skills training.

*Waving university fees and proactive enrolment outreach can support young care leavers to access higher education and raise aspirations (p.44).*

There is a lack of specialised programming in Ontario for vulnerable care leavers. The majority of policies and programs use a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, whereby the same services are provided to all young people, regardless of their individual needs and circumstances. This includes youth with mental health issues, young parents, LGBTQIA+ youth, youth with disabilities, and Indigenous and CALD youth.

## Indigenous children and families

Indigenous children and young people are overrepresented in the child welfare system in Ontario, and in systems across Canada. There is an identified need to implement more effective and culturally appropriate policy and program responses to support Indigenous youth as they transition out of care, signalled by recent legislative changes.

The new Child, Youth and Family Services Act recognises the role of culture and community for First Nations, Inuit, and Metis children in the child protection system and takes steps to address their overrepresentation. Statutory amendments will increase access to customary care to allow children and youth to remain closely connected to their community and implement holistic, wraparound culturally appropriate support, and strengthen the role of Indigenous service providers focused on prevention and early intervention.

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# Victoria, Australia

Unlike other jurisdictions, reforms of the leaving care system in Victoria were embedded in broader care reforms. Prior to 2016, Victoria was arguably an outlier in Australia, lacking prescriptive legislative or adequately resources services for care leavers. However, after many years of failure, Victoria has become the leading Australian provider of transitional care and support.

## Legislative and Extended Care Context

Reforms in Victoria commenced in 2016 with the *Roadmap for Reform - Strong Families, Safe Children*, which transformed the children and family system from crisis response to earlier intervention and prevention. Under these reforms, Victoria began piloting *Better Futures*, a new approach to supporting care leavers. Based on evaluations and positive outcomes from the pilot programmes, *Better Futures* was rolled out state-wide in late 2019 with all eligible young people in care referred to their local *Better Futures* provided at 15 years and nine months.

*Better Futures* is based on a person-centred approach which supports young people to thrive by aligning resources, opportunities, and the community with their skills and aspirations. The programme engages with young people and their support networks, including their case managers and care teams, early in their transition from care. To be eligible for support, young people must be in kinship care, foster care, residential care, or permanent care on or after their 16th birthday. If eligible, the case manager refers the young person to *Better Futures* when they reach 15 years and nine months, and a *Better Futures* worker is made available to help them transition from care up until they reach 21 years of age. The programme provides intensive case work support, information and advice services, and flexible funding. The support covers a wide range of areas including housing, independent living skills, education and employment, health and wellbeing, and connections with the local community.

In response to positive findings from extended care programmes in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Victoria introduced *Home Stretch* in 2018. In 2021, Victoria became the first Australian jurisdiction to make extended care available to all young people leaving foster, kinship, and residential care, and young people on permanent care orders to ensure a more gradual and supportive transition to adulthood.

*Home Stretch* delivered via the *Better Futures* programme, provides transitional case work support and flexible funding to facilitate the young person's access to education, employment, and health and wellbeing supports, as well as accommodation allowance to young people from 16 years of age. The latter supports young people and their carers to continue kinship care, foster care, and permanent care living arrangements, or helps young people transition to other available housing options, such as a private rental.

Stakeholders from Victoria reported that one of the greatest challenges in implementing *Home Stretch* was to ensure the Department did not see the implementation of *Home Stretch* as an opportunity to opt out of or reduce the leaving care responsibilities and statutory obligations they retain. As a way to address this, the *Better Futures* referral process became automated through alerts that commenced for every eligible child at 15 and nine months and continued to send prompts until the referral was completed.

*Home Stretch should be considered as a vital addition to, not a replacement of, the Department's obligations to young people (p.54).*

The *Home Stretch* programme is proposed to be embedded in Victorian legislation when the *Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Home Stretch) Bill 2023* is passed. This Bill seeks to provide a legislative framework for the *Home Stretch* program and expand the Secretary's responsibilities to provide services to young people leaving out of home care until they reach the age of 21. The new Bill creates a legal obligation to provide a transition to adulthood allowance for all eligible care leavers, further positioning Victoria as the lead jurisdiction for care leaver supports in Australia. The allowance will contribute to the costs of accommodation and support of young people who have left care as they transition to adulthood where the young person is living independently or where they are remaining with their existing home-based carer.

*Victoria is considering embedding some features of Home Stretch in the legislation to guarantee young people's access to these supports.*

## Aftercare supports

As part of Victoria's *Better Futures* program, young people are offered a level of in-care and post-care support (from 15 and 9 months to 21) that is tailored to their individual needs, existing support networks, transition goals, and history of engagement. After a consultation with the young person and/or care team, they may be placed on active hold, received limited support, or active support. Young people receiving active hold support are contacted - at a minimum - every 3 months by a *Better Futures* worker to check in. The goal of this is to ensure young people understand the types of support available and have the tools necessary to access it, even if they don't require or want it right then. This program has seen increased engagement and re-engagement rates since implementation, and has eliminated the need for waiting lists.

*Community Connections* is a key service offer of the *Better Futures* model that aims to build supportive networks, pathways, and opportunities for young people leaving care within their communities. Volunteer mentors are matched with young people based on common interests and goals. Mentoring is available to a young person from 15 to 21 years. Their role is to help young people explore their personal and professional aspirations and provide them with guidance, support, and encouragement. *Community Connectors* do not provide case work but play a key role in the young person's *Better Futures* care team along with their *Better Futures* worker or the young person's case manager if the young person is in care.

Informal supports, particularly peers, can significantly help young people through their transitions out of care (p.42).

The *Skills First Youth Access Initiation* supports care leavers, or those previously involved in the youth justice system 24 years and under to access TAFE courses and not pay tuition fees. When a young person enrolls in a course through the *Skills First Youth Access Initiative*, they are linked to other care leaver services and supports at the educational institution. For care leavers aged 17-19 who have been disengaged in education and training for more than 6 months, *Skills First Reconnect* provides a range of wrap around services to increase participation and outcomes in education and training.

Promoting coordination between education providers and supports for care leavers helps young people reach their potential (p.46).

When leaving care, young people are eligible for a payment of up to \$1500 to cover costs under the *Commonwealth's Transition to Independent Living Allowance* (TILA). TILA is designed to pay for items such as education, counselling, medical costs, fridge, driver's licence or any other agreed items. They can also apply for the *Leaving Care Housing and Support Initiative Program*, provided by community based organisations whose staff work with young people in identifying appropriate accommodation and supporting their transition. This program focuses on young people from 16 years of age who are at highest risk of homelessness when they leave care.

*Cradle to Kinder* is a Victorian early intervention program, specialising in the needs of young pregnant women, Aboriginal parents, and parents who have been in out-of-home-care. The program delivers intensive support to young women until their child turns five. The long-term nature of the program, as well as the connection with other community services, the availability of brokerage funds, and the access to peer support are the program's core aspects. *Cradle to Kinder's Aboriginal Program* is specifically tailored to provide a culturally competent service for Aboriginal families. An evaluation completed in 2017 found that the program has the potential to change the cycle of intergenerational vulnerability by empowering parents to build a solid foundation for their families' futures.

Targeted services to support young parents who have been in care can help break the cycle of intergenerational removal (p.52).

## Aboriginal children and families

In Victoria, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) are empowered to lead the response to child protection reports regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, with authorities delegating duties of care and case management. These changes follow a first stage of legislative reforms – A second stage is likely to further enable Aboriginal agencies to exercise direct control over decisions regarding the best interests of Aboriginal children. A *Transitioning Aboriginal Children Team* has been established within the Department to assist with the transfer of duties to ACCO's and ensure the development of a transparent and sustainable state-wide framework.

This change is an important step in achieving self-determination for Aboriginal communities and aims to provide better outcomes for all Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care. Aboriginal children who are cared for by an ACCO have a greater connection to culture, which can lead to better health and wellbeing outcomes. Aboriginal children and young people case managed by ACCO's will have the opportunity to thrive in a culturally safe and connected environment.

This work is part of the Victorian Government's commitment to self-determination for Aboriginal people and aims to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.

*Delegating case management to ACCOs could help promote Aboriginal young people's connection to culture and Country, a key factor in their transitions out of care (p.48).*

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# New Zealand

Until 2019, New Zealand had one of the youngest leaving care ages in the developed world and were aging out of care at 17 with no formal provision for ongoing support. Today, new legislation and transition policies have been introduced at a time of major change in the delivery of child protection services, and as the rates of young people in care hit all time highs.

## Legislative and Extended Care Context

In New Zealand, young people in care placements are under the protection of the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki (Oranga Tamariki or Ministry for Children), operating under the *Children, Young Persons, and Their Families (CYPF) Act*. The broad objective of this Act is to promote the wellbeing of children, young persons, and their families. In regards to leaving care, protection of the CYPF Act ended once a young person turned 17, as they were considered to be adults under New Zealand law. For young people in care, this meant losing access to some types of placements (e.g. bed nights, group homes, independent living), and in other types of placements (e.g. foster care), having their caregivers lose access to professional and financial support.

In 2016, as a part of an overall review of New Zealand's Care and Protection system, the review's Expert Panel recommended that the care leaving age should be extended from 17 to 18. Quoting international evidence, the Panel anticipated that raising the age of care to 18 would improve the health, education, labour market, offending, and teenage pregnancy outcomes of care leavers. In the first year it was predicted that raising the care age would directly affect over 300 young people aged 17 and 160 15-16 year olds indirectly (by incentivising them to remain in placements longer).

From 2017, changes to the legislation included the increase of the eligibility age at which young people can remain (or return to) placement, to the age of 18. The Panel explained their reasoning behind this decision, including aligning the age in which young people exit care with other laws and norms such as voting and tenancy agreements that requires individuals to be at least aged 18 and with New Zealand's obligations under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* which sets adulthood at 18. Beyond legal obligations, the Panel also considered scientific evidence and cognitive findings that suggests the process of brain maturation took longer than previously thought.

Additionally, the new legislation stipulated young people's entitlement to supported transition. The stated purpose of the legislative amendment includes: preparing young people to be ready to thrive as independent young adults; preparation to begin early; ensuring that young people have opportunities for relationships with caregivers and other trusted adults that endure into adulthood; and enabling young people until the age of 25 to access the government and community support needed to manage challenges and to grow and develop as adults.

The principles outlined in the new legislation emphasise the importance of the young person increasingly leading decisions about matters affecting them and a holistic approach building on, and nurturing, the young person's strengths and identity. Relationships between the young person and their whānau (family), hapū (community), and iwi (people) are, if appropriate, to be maintained and strengthened and these entities and communities are to be supported to help the young person move to independence. Relationships between the young person and a caregiver, other trusted adults, and the wider community are to be established, built on, and maintained. The young person is to be supported, to the extent that is reasonable and practical, to address the impact of harm and to achieve and meet their aspirations and needs, with priority given to supporting their education. Assistance to the young person is to be provided proactively, promptly, and sustained regardless of the decisions that the young person makes.

To aid in the implementation of these legislative provisions, a policy was developed to support social workers. This policy stipulates that the transition process should begin from the age of 15; supported by a full assessment of what the young person will need to make a successful transition to independence. The New Zealand government's 2019 Wellbeing budget allocated \$153.7 million for new transition services.

## Aftercare supports

On 1 July 2019 New Zealand introduced the *Transition Support Service* aimed at supporting young people leaving the care system as they move to adulthood and independence. The service works collaboratively across agencies which advocate for young people, and since it was established, the government has partnered with 67 community organisations to set up the service across New Zealand. As of June 2021, 46% of them are Māori organisations.



The strong representation of Māori organisations amongst *Transition Support Service* delivery partner reflects the broader context in New Zealand, where the government is shifting the approach they take when interacting with Māori people and communities and are making a conscious effort to shift the procurement of government services back to iwi (community or kinship groups).

*Contracting Indigenous organisations to deliver services for care leavers promotes cultural safety and positive engagement (p.48).*

One of the cornerstones of the *Transition Support Service* is the *Transition Worker*. Any young person who has been in care or the custody of the Ministry for Children for a continuous period of three months after the age of 14 years and nine months, is entitled to support from a *Transition Worker* from age 15. The role of the *Transition Worker* is to facilitate a gradual and supported transition from care to independence. They are responsible for proactively keeping in contact with the young person after they leave care up to the age of 21 and helping them access the advice and assistance they need to become independent. The *Transition Worker* also supports young people to remain living with, or return to living with their caregiver, if both parties agree. Today there are more than 120 *Transition Support Workers* actively working with 1,275 care leavers.

*In NZ, young people have a Transition worker from age 15 to 21 which helps support continuity of care. This Transition worker is involved in leaving care planning early on, alongside key support people (p.24).*

The *Transition Support Service* places a strong emphasis on transition planning. It is mandated that a transition plan must be developed once a young person reaches 15 years old or as soon as possible afterwards, and must be formally reviewed and updated at least once a year and at least six months prior to the young person turning 18. The plan must record the aspirations of the young person, the practical arrangements for when they leave care and the supports that will be provided to achieve their aspirations, including but not limited to living situation, education, training and/or employment, health and wellbeing, cultural, and whānau connections, peer and community connections, legal considerations, financial support, life skills and essential documents.

In New Zealand, family group conferences are the primary mechanism by which transition plans are developed and endorsed. The young person together with their support people, Oranga Tamariki social workers and coordinators, necessary professional including lawyers or disability and mental health workers, and a *Transition Worker* if they have one assigned, meet to share, ask questions, listen, and draft a plan of the needs to be addressed and tasks to accomplish as the young person leaves care and enters adulthood. The plan must be reviewed at least yearly through this mechanism. Once the young person turns 18, it is the responsibility of their *Transition Worker* to review the plan through whichever planning mechanism they both deem fit.

Up to the age of 25, care leavers can also receive advice and assistance from the *Transition Support Service Helpline*, which provides support with matters such as finding accommodation, enrolling in a training course, finding employment, getting legal advice or counselling, and accessing financial support.

*Where Home Stretch supports end at age 21 in WA, NZ has a helpline available to young care leavers until age 25 (p.24)*

An evaluation of the *Transitions Support Service* was undertaken in 2022 gathers the voices of young people and understand how they are being supported, what difference the support has made for them, and their living situations. The study found that while the new service had been successfully established and that the support offered by *Transition Workers* matched the needs of young people, there are major workforce and funding issues that are resulting in mixed experiences for young people and families. Additionally, pre-transition planning was found to not yet be consistent, with variations in practice noted. It became clear that transition planning works best in regions with a dedicated Oranga Tamariki transition resource.

*Similarly to NZ, the effective delivery of Home Stretch in WA could be impacted by staffing issues, which is an important factor for the Department to consider (p.54)*



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# United Kingdom

For the last 30 years there has been a steady increase in Government engagement in the lives of young people leaving care. In an attempt to improve the consistent poor outcomes in educational attainment, employment, mental health, and rates of homelessness, the United Kingdom has introduced a series of policy initiatives and programs targeted at care leavers.

## Legislative and Extended Care Context

The care leaving age has been extended all across the United Kingdom, albeit in differing and siloed approaches by each of the four nations governments.

### England

The United Kingdom introduced the *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000* in October 2001. Two key features of the Act were the extension of the leaving care age from 16 to 18 and the obligation for local authorities to continue providing advice and support for young care leavers up to the age of 21. For those still in education or training, this age limit could be extended up to 24 years. This support includes the creation of individual pathway plans at 16 years of age that identifies a young person's needs and outlines how these needs will be met, along with the appointment of a *Personal Adviser* to work with the young person and coordinate the resources and services require to meet the pathway plan. The *Children and Social Work Act 2017* extended the entitlement to support from a *Personal Adviser* to all care leavers up to the age of 25 upon request, not just those in full time education.

England introduced its extended care program, *Staying Put*, as a pilot in 2008. It was later legislated as a duty as part of the 2014 amendments to the *Children and Families Act*. Local authorities are now required to facilitate, monitor, and support 'staying put arrangements' which permit fostered young people to remain with their foster families up until the age of 21. The three stated objectives of the *Staying Put* pilot program were to advance a more gradual and normative pathway to adulthood; to assist young people to optimise achievements in education, training and employment; and to give weight to the views of young people on the timing of their move from care to independence. A child in care who is pursuing further education or training may be entitled to support until the age of 25, but beyond their 21st birthday it cannot be defined as a *staying put arrangement*.

The *Staying Put* program faced widespread criticism over the exclusion of young people leaving residential care. In 2018, the Government introduced a two-year pilot program appropriately titled *Staying Close*, in which care leavers in residential care can live independently in accommodation close to their previous placement with ongoing support from carers and staff. A 2018-20 evaluation found improved independent living skills after 6 months as well as increased housing stability, increased participation in activities such as education or employment and increased happiness. The Government signalled its commitment to a nation-wide roll-out.

### Scotland

Scotland's *Staying Put* policy – called *Continuing Care* – was introduced through guidance published in 2013 and consolidated into legislation by the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*.

Young people in foster, kinship, or residential care were now able to request access to the *Continuing Care* scheme, and if their carer is willing to provide it, they can remain in their current care placement until they turn 21. The 2014 legislative changes also made any young person who has exited care on or after their sixteenth birthday and is less than 26 years of age eligible for aftercare. This applies to all care leavers regardless of the placement type while looked after. The Act also extended responsibilities to promote the interests and wellbeing of care leavers to health bodies and Further Education providers.

In 2019, the Scottish government committed to reforming the care system and improving available support for young people once they transition out of care. Luckily for Scotland's youth, the commitment has been real. Since then there has been a wave of policies, all designed to better support care leavers. The *A Way Home Scotland Coalition*, funded by the Scottish Government, produced eight recommendations regarding care leavers and their housing pathways in November 2019. These included streamlining and better communicating the financial support available to care leavers.

In 2021, *The Promise Change Programme* was published, detailing the requirement for investment in the lives of children and families to be considered strategically and holistically in the context of their experiences.

Providing young people who leave residential care with alternative options for accommodation post 18 is crucial to support their transitions.

In March 2022, the Scottish Government announced its multi-agency 'Keeping the Promise' Implementation Plan that sets out the actions and commitments necessary to keep the promise for care experienced children, young people and their families. The development of the Plan involved actors across and throughout the care system, including the wide range of agencies that commission and operate it. Through working together on a single mandate and policy priority, cross-governmental and sector collaboration has been strengthened and the voices of young people with lived experience continue to be held at the centre. This approach has also reduced siloed working through identification of the various components of the sector that must work together to reform the system.

Implementing cross-governmental and sector coordination is crucial to comprehensively meet young care leavers' needs (p.46)

A Bill has been tabled in the Scottish Parliament that will result in care-experience being recognised as a protected characteristic against discrimination under the *Equality Act 2010*. This represents Scotland's great strides in removing the stigma associated with being a young person in care, recognising the significant challenges that these young people face in their lives. Campaigners have labeled this move as the single biggest action taken to support these who are care-experienced.

## Aftercare supports

The support to which care leavers are entitled varies across the UK nations - but there are some shining stars.

When you enter care in England you are allocated a social worker. When you turn 16, you are introduced to a *Personal Advisor* who works alongside the social worker until the young person turns 18. At 18, the *Personal Advisor* becomes the primary worker and there is no longer an allocated social worker. For care leavers aged 18-21, their *Personal Advisor* will make contact at least every eight weeks. For those aged between 21-25 who have elected to receive extended duties, contact must occur a minimum of every 12 weeks, depending on the level of need. For those 21-25 who have exited, the *Care Leavers' Service* will reach out every 12 months until their 25th birthday to remind them of their entitlements and they can re-enter anytime. However, *The Independent Review of Children's Social Care* made it abundantly clear that this system is underfunded, understaffed, and, as a result, underperforming in supporting care leavers and dedicating the time and resources necessary to do life changing work.

A policy commitment under the *Keep on Caring* document is the strengthening of the culture of corporate parenting through introduction of a *Care Leaver Covenant* in the United Kingdom. The Covenant is a promise made by the private, public, and voluntary sectors to provide support for care leavers aged 16-25 to help them to live independently. This support is focused in five key areas - independent living, education, employment, and training, safety and security, mental and physical health, and finance. Each organisation that commits to the *Care Leaver Covenant* declares a support package to care leavers that is tailored to its expertise, experience, and environment. These packages range from opportunities to enter the workforce in a variety of sectors through internships or traineeships, additional support such as one-to-one mentoring or guidance on various aspects of their lives such as finance or career and education prospects, involvement in specific activities and events that inspire their personal interest or broaden their horizons including access to sport, leisure, or cultural activities, as well as retail discounts.

The *National House Project* is an innovative approach to housing provision for care leavers. The Project was co-designed with young people from the beginning and works on cooperative principles through which care leavers and their support adults work together to refurbish properties that they own and build a long-term community of support. They have a choice in where they live, how long they live there for (forever if that is what they choose to do), how it is furnished, and learn skills that enable them to live successful independent lives. There are now 16 Local House Projects across England and Scotland, and as of the updated statistics, 568 young people across 62 are part of the House Project community having moved into 310 homes, there have been 0 breakdowns of tenancy, and 100% of participants have completed relevant education, training, or employment while in the Project.

In the UK, the equivalent of District Offices have dedicated resources and allocated workers for post-care support (p.35).

Initiatives that provide wrap-around and connected support (e.g. housing & community support) are easier to access and meet young people's needs more comprehensively (p.39)

*Who Cares? Scotland* is a UK-wide organisation with a membership of over 3000 care-experienced people. *Who Cares?* has a strong advocacy arm, including independent advocacy, local peer groups, and a helpline. Young people walk alongside advocates and their peers to learn about their rights and the services available to them, and develop the confidence to be involved in decision-making.

*Who Cares?* also founded the Communities that Care initiative which uses community and whole-school approaches to educate Scotland about care through awareness raising activities in local areas, and create a variety of connection opportunities for young people to increase feelings of belonging.

In July 2022, the Welsh Government launched the *Basic Income for Care Leavers Pilot*. This will run for a minimum of three years and involves care leavers in Wales receiving monthly payments of £1,600, alongside individual advice and support, for two years following their 18th birthday. The payments will be made without any conditions attached. Recipients will also receive individual financial advice and support. The Welsh Government expects that over 500 care leavers will be eligible to join the scheme, which is not mandatory. The pilot will deliver valuable learning about whether a basic income approach leads to positive affects to mitigate against some of key challenges that those leaving care face.

*Lifelong Links* is a programme developed by Family Rights Group to connect care experienced young people to a volunteer support network of people who are important to them throughout their lives or who they would like to get to know - including family members, teachers, former foster carers, and other adults who are significant to the young person. The coordinator searches for these people, meets with them, and invites them to come together to a *Lifelong Links* family group conference aimed at supporting the child or young person. Together, the child and their identified support network form a "*lifelong support plan*" to ensure the child continues to see and have relationships with the important people in their life post-care.

The local authority then integrates the support plan into the child's official care or pathway plan. Qualitative evidence found that *Lifelong Links* also improved young people's sense of agency by supporting them in building their own life narratives and building safe relationships with the people important to them.

*Peer-work programs could significantly help young care leavers navigate the system and promote their sense of belonging (p.42).*

*Recognising and promoting informal supports as a key to support successful transitions out of care (p.42).*

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# Contact us

The contacts in relation to this report are:

Helene Tholoniati [helene.tholoniati@innovationunit.org](mailto:helene.tholoniati@innovationunit.org)  
or Jay Martin [jay.martin@innovationunit.org](mailto:jay.martin@innovationunit.org)

[www.innovationunit.org](http://www.innovationunit.org)



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# **Appendices**

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# **Detailed recommendations**

# Detailed recommendations by age

Prior to leaving care planning: <15

## Recommendations

*Prioritise and deliver connection to family, culture and Country for all children in care at all stages.*

- Provide children and young people in care with regular and ongoing opportunities to know their culture, particularly children whose carers are not of the same ethnicity
- For Aboriginal children, this includes the opportunity to know and walk on their Country, and to take part in community obligations and activities.
- Ensure children and carers have access to relevant family history, including medical conditions.
- Recognise the need to increase the number of Aboriginal carers and staff across the out-of-home care system, including in residential care homes and in child protection teams (e.g., child safety investigation teams).

*Provide stability and consistency of care for children and young people throughout their journey*

Recognising that breakdowns in placement and in relationships have a significant detrimental impact on young people's lives:

- Invest in placements, in quality and quantity, to ensure young people experience stability of care and minimise breakdowns of relationships.
- Invest in the out-of-home-care workforce to increase the stability of teams and consistency of case management so that young people can build relationships with those who are here to support them.
- Ensure that young people who self-select or choose to 'leave care' before 15 are aware of and have access to the same supports afforded to all children in care.

*Assess children and young people for mental and physical health challenges and disabilities and intervene early to improve young people's life chances*

- Provide basic health and age-appropriate assessments for all children to identify any disabilities, health challenges, mental health issues.
- Intervene early - provide treatments and support for issues so as to maximise the opportunity for improvement and reduce the cost for children at the time and in later life of undiagnosed or untreated issues.
- Make available specialised NDIS staff to all eligible young people to ensure young people receive all possible entitlements and supports under the Scheme.
- Explore ways to provide culturally-responsive mental health support, including alternatives to formal counselling sessions (e.g., traditional yarning with Elders to provide a safe and private space for Aboriginal young people to talk and open up).

# Detailed recommendations by age

Prior to leaving care planning: <15

## Recommendations

*Bring multiple agencies together to position young people to succeed at school.*

- Understand that children in care can be bullied and feel stigmatised because of their care status and/or because of things that happened before entry into care, and engage with schools to deliver trauma-responsive schooling for all young people in care
- Assess children's school readiness on entry to care and planning for remedial activities (as necessary) to prime children to succeed
- Prioritise attendance and continuity of schooling for children and young people throughout care
- Intervene at the earliest signs of disengagement in individualised and trauma-responsive ways

*Respond to training gaps for carers and other workers so that their knowledge keeps up with contemporary understandings.*

- Provide appropriate training and materials to carers on issues such as dealing with sexuality to support young people to understand and grow into their preferred gender or sexuality
- Provide appropriate supports for young people who identify as LGBTQI+ or who may have questions regarding their sexuality or sexual and gender identifications, recognising that many carers and workers report being confused or uncomfortable with this material.

# Detailed recommendations by age

## Leaving care - 15-17

### Recommendations

*Ensure that leaving care is a planned and staged process that offers time, information and support as a young person approaches adulthood.*

- Offer early information to ensure young people and carers understand leaving care and post-care options and can make an informed decision about which services or supports to access. This should be communicated to young people by their case manager but could also be complemented by events to connect young people with support services (e.g., Leaving Care expos).
- Identify a known and trusted person to introduce and start to talk to young people about leaving care; provide support to carers who might want to be involved in or lead this process, such as information and materials to help the young person understand what is happening, when and why.
- Ensure leaving care planning involves a range of people who have been supporting the young person, as well as the young person themselves.
- Regularly and proactively re-visit leaving care plans to make sure they provide everything the young person needs on an on-going basis and take into considerations any changes or new issues.
- Time leaving care planning and implementation so that education is not disrupted - no exits during Year 12, for example.
- Ensure young people have key items like ID and medical history by the time they leave care and/or when it is needed (whichever is the earlier)

*Deliver DoC responsibilities to care leavers consistently to all care leavers, including through dedicated resources for care leavers in every DoC office*

- Recognise that while young people do and should have options to access other agencies, the Department retains legal and moral responsibilities for young people that must be fulfilled and that no other actions or referrals negate this.
- Allocate resources to each District Office for Leaving Care Teams or specialised staff, dedicated to support young people aged 15 to 17 in their transition out of care, with young people able to access support in their preferred location - close to their home, to study or work, or to a community they want to live in. This recognises that young people move around before and during their transition out of care and ensures they are not disadvantaged if they do.
- Ensure Leaving Care Teams or staff are adequately resourced (e.g., caseloads of 10-12 young people per worker, adapted based on the complexity of young people's needs) to proactively and positively engage with young people, and not just at crisis point.
- Provide a quality assurance process for leaving care planning so that leaving care plans are always done on time and well, and young people have all they need in place before leaving care (e.g., 'by name list', system generated flags to check completion of care plans and basic needs such as ID).
- Offer flexible and locally-specific workers who can offer on-going relationships with local services, with support provided on a drop-in or outreach basis that takes into consideration young people's level of need for support and their preferences for service delivery.
- Support young people where they are - with no passing off between offices or across agencies.
- Support consistent practice across District Offices by providing teams with clear practice guidelines and training on leaving care, and by developing opportunities for districts to share practice across metropolitan and regional areas (e.g., Community of Practice for Leaving Care Teams)
- Implement mechanisms at a coordinated state level to continuously review and improve leaving care practice (e.g., steering group including Department, service providers and relevant stakeholders).



# Detailed recommendations by age

## Leaving care - 15-17

### Recommendations

*Increase whole-of-system coordination around young people leaving care*

- Proactively coordinate multiple agencies (principally Communities, Health, Education) to deliver seamless and joined up government service to young people who are leaving care.
- Dedicate resources for specialised roles within District Offices who can support teams in identifying and meeting the needs of young people in all areas of their lives, such as health or education (e.g., Education Officers, NDIS officers)
- Seek ways to share data or information (e.g. with TAFEs, Centrelink, job agencies) so that care leavers are not responsible for understanding what they could get (e.g. TAFE enrolment officers understand care leavers can get help with fees and help them access this).

*Support young people to live independently and build healthy relationships, in a gradual and age-appropriate way*

- Dedicate time and resources to ensure young people get support to develop independent living skills, such as cooking, cleaning, budgeting. This could include supporting carers to guide young people through this learning.
- Support young people to understand and navigate key systems they need post 16 such as Centrelink, Housing, Medicare, ATO, and banks.
- Support young people to identify and access housing options for when they leave care.
- Support young people to complete their driver's lessons and get their driver's licence, as it is often instrumental to access the services they need as well as job opportunities. Consideration should also be given to provide financial support for young people to purchase a vehicle.
- Support young people to learn about what healthy (and abusive) relationships should look like while they are still in care, to prevent family and domestic violence.

*Support young people to grow their own support networks as they prepare to leave care, including supporting them to reconnect with family*

- Respond to young people's desire to or the fact of reconnecting with family, and support this through family finding and support to gradually connect safely.
- Recognise that many supports young people need and benefit from are external and/or informal and find ways to support and encourage new people, organisations and companies to help young people leaving care.

# Detailed recommendations by age

## Leaving care - 15-17

### Recommendations

*Explore ways to provide culturally-responsive leaving care support to Aboriginal young people*

- Develop partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to engage with Aboriginal young people, ensure they access culturally-responsive leaving care support and improve their opportunities to connect with their culture and Country.

*Support aspirational post-school planning of and for young people in care.*

- Recognise that young people leaving care may have internalised low expectations for themselves and that they require and deserve dedicated structured activities that encourage them to aim high
- Actively support young people around key transitions (such as into high school, and into Years 10 and 11) to raise and broaden aspirations of and for young people in care
- Actively support young people to understand and explore different education and career pathways - including university, TAFE, trade training, employment pathways.

*Providing extra supports for young people engaged with juvenile justice*

- Intensive, multi-agency case coordination to support individual young people during and after involvement with juvenile justice, including an intensive process of identifying core issues for young people and providing necessary supports so that young people can continue their education or other developmental activities.
- Young people should never exit justice or health settings into homelessness.

# Detailed recommendations by age

## Post care - 18-25

### Recommendations

*Provide individual, local and flexible post-care support that doesn't rely on the young person navigating a complex system, including through dedicated resources for care leavers in every DoC region.*

- Recognise that while young people do and should have options to access other agencies, the Department retains legal and moral responsibilities for young people that must be fulfilled and that no other actions or referrals negate this.
- Allocate resources for Department workers to deliver dedicated post-care support to young people in each DoC region with young people able to access support in their preferred location - close to their home, to study or work, or to a community they want to live in. This recognises that young people may move around before and during their transition out of care and ensures they are not disadvantaged if they do so.
- Supports are provided through dedicated post-care teams or staff who have all of the necessary information regarding young people to hand, who provide services in a non-stigmatising and welcoming way (e.g. dedicated space separate to other DoC staff), and with whom young people have or have the opportunity to develop an on-going in-person relationship with (consistent staffing, in-person drop-in services). These services are particularly critical for young people who will not be accessing Home Stretch or other Leaving Care Services.
- Post-care services should be flexible, individualised, consistent across regions, and respond to the range of financial and non-financial needs and demands that young people will have. Consider the need to update IT systems so that all post-care support (including non-financial) provided by District Offices to young people can be recorded.

*Reach out proactively and regularly to care experienced young people to ensure they can access support when they need it.*

- Post care supports are proactively, repeatedly and flexibly offered to young people - the services find them, they are not required to find their way to the service. Reach out to young people consistently and regularly, updating them on what's available and offering them the opportunity to discuss changes to their needs or situation, and to be connected with other supports, ensuring care leavers are never without necessary medical or other supports (e.g., tracking care leavers in homelessness using By Name lists).
- A young person's decision to leave care must never result in the door to support being shut; the door must always be left open so that young people can change their mind or get access to things that the Department is responsible for providing.
- Continue proactive outreach to care leavers, including those who have rejected multiple offers. Target those care leavers who do not know they are entitled to anything (e.g. through public campaigns or similar).

# Detailed recommendations by age

## Post care - 18-25

### Recommendations

*Provide specialised support to young parents who have been in care to break the cycle of intergenerational removal*

- Invest in prevention or early intervention support services for pregnant mothers and young parents who were previously in care to prepare and accompany them as they become parents. These services are likely to be more effective if provided by an external service provider rather than the Department, as the trauma and fear of intergenerational removal is likely to present a barrier to engagement.
- These services should offer trusted, supportive and non-judgemental advice and tangible help with the practical issues they have - which include healthy relationships, housing, financial support, help to study and work, as well as parenting advice and support.

*Support Aboriginal young people's ongoing connection to Country and culture, including via dedicated post care funding*

- Allocate sufficient post-care funding to enable young people to visit or return to Country regularly, including for significant events such as funerals.
- Support the development of community initiatives for young people to learn and connect with their Country and culture (e.g., connecting young people to Elders for mentorship and guidance).

*Explore the role of peer work in the out-of-home sector, recognising the power of shared lived experience to build trust and supportive relationships.*

- Consider investing in peer-based programs, either recreational/social (e.g., camps, hanging out) or more directive (peer coaches, mentors), by which care experienced people could mentor and guide young care leavers through their transition out of care, providing advice and emotional support along the way. This could prove particularly beneficial for those care leavers who have disengaged from care, who are distrustful of government and services, who are from groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background or LGBTQIA+ background who feel unwelcome in some other spaces

*Increase whole-of-system coordination to ensure care leavers have priority access to services (e.g., mental health, housing, education)*

- In line with the Rapid Response protocol (Cabinet endorsed across-government framework), ensure that a range of government agencies support young people in care and care leavers until the age of 25 by providing them with priority access to the services that they require (e.g., mental health services, housing).
- Seek ways to share data or information (e.g. with TAFEs, Centrelink, job agencies) so that care leavers are not responsible for understanding what the Department is required to provide them with (e.g. TAFE enrolment officers understand care leavers can get help with fees and help them access this).

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# **Service mapping**



# Perth Metro Service Map

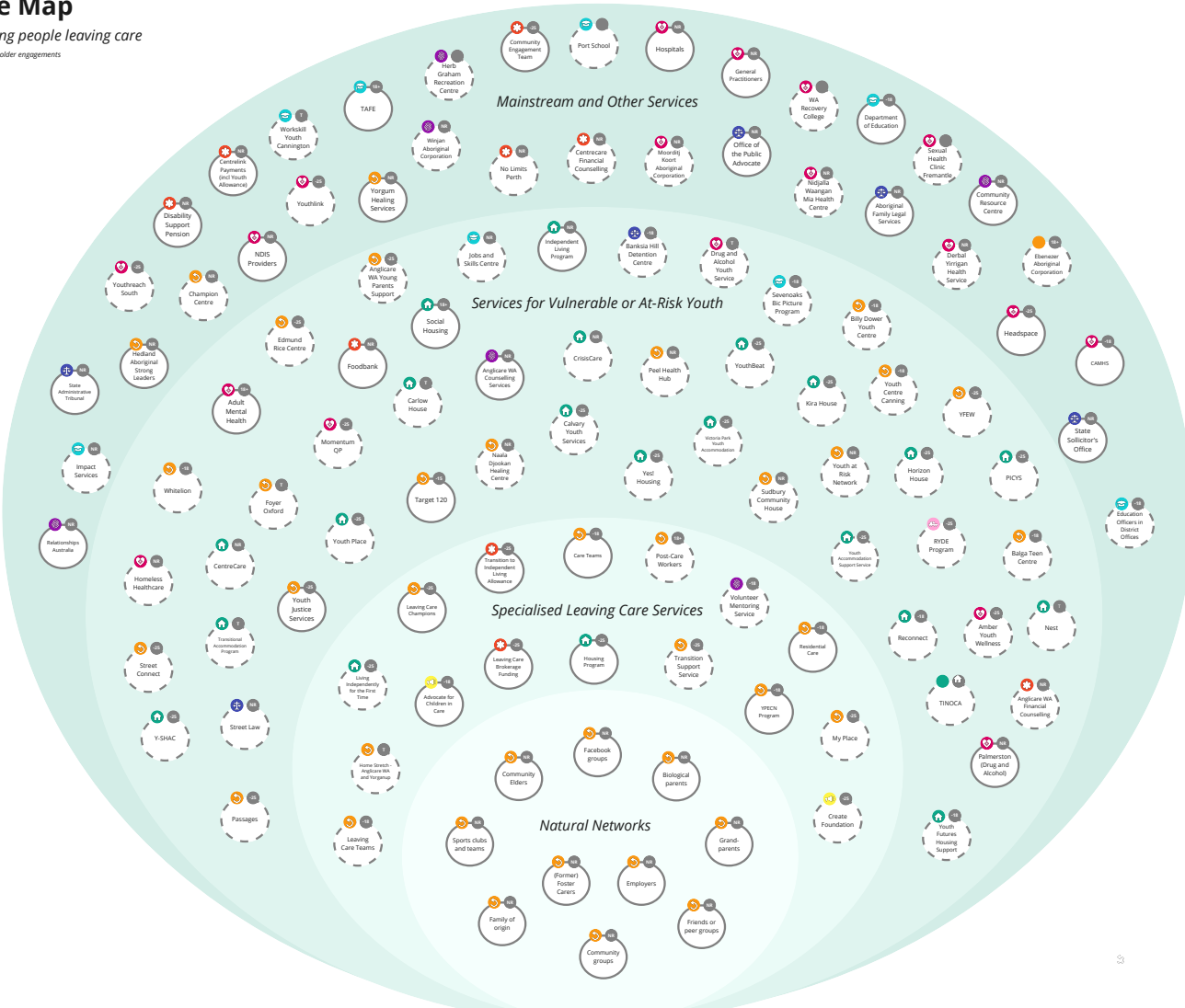
State-wide and local services for young people leaving care

This map is not conclusive and is based on data gathered through stakeholder engagements

-  Legal services
-  Education and employment
-  Housing and life skills
-  Health and wellbeing
-  Financial and emergency relief
-  Relationships, identity and culture
-  Wrap around services
-  Driving support
-  Recreation
-  Advocacy and development











-  Services for young people under 15
-  Services for young people over 18
-  Services for young people under 18
-  Services for young people under 25
-  No age restriction for service entry
-  'Transitional' services (covering years pre and post 18)








# Great Southern Service Map

State-wide and local services for young people leaving care

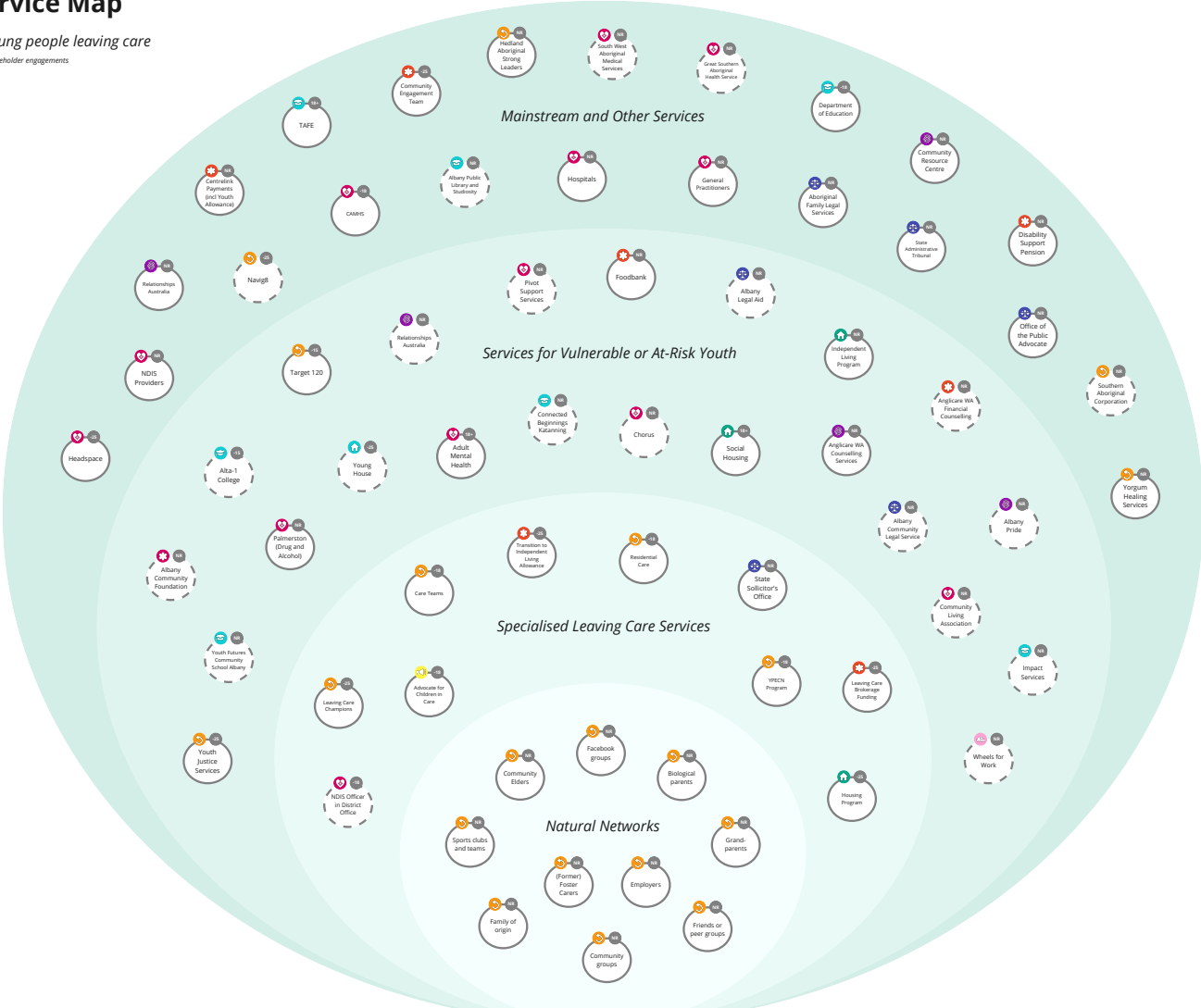
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-  Legal services
-  Education and employment
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-  Financial and emergency relief
-  Relationships, identity and culture
-  Wrap-around services
-  Driving support
-  Recreation
-  Advocacy and development

-  Services for young people under 15
-  Services for young people over 18
-  Services for young people under 18
-  Services for young people under 25
-  No age restriction for service entry











-  Place-based
-  State-wide







# Pilbara Service Map

State-wide and local services for young people leaving care

This map is not conclusive and is based on data gathered through stakeholder engagements

-  Legal services
-  Education and employment
-  Housing and life skills
-  Health and wellbeing
-  Financial and emergency relief
-  Relationships, identity and culture
-  Wrap around services
-  Driving support
-  Recreation
-  Advocacy and development

-  Services for young people under 15
-  Services for young people over 18
-  Services for young people under 18
-  Services for young people under 25
-  No age restriction for service entry

-  Place-based
-  State-wide

