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## CREATE's Advocacy for Young People Transitioning from Care in Australia

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### CREATE's Origins

This chapter will present a brief history, and discuss the operation and impact of the CREATE Foundation (CREATE), the peak consumer body in Australia representing the voices of children and young people with an out-of-home care (OOHC) experience. Its forerunner, the Australian Association of Young People in Care (AAYPIC), was formed in 1993 by Jan Owen AM, who guided its development for the first nine years. Summaries of its early activities can be found in the Annual Report of the New South Wales Association of Children's Welfare Agencies 1995–96 (ACWA 1996), under whose auspices it operated for six years. AAYPIC was established with seed funding of \$46,000 from the Charles and Sylvia Viertel Charitable Foundation. By 1996, this group was attracting around \$150,000 in financial assistance from governments and various corporate supporters, and had produced a major child welfare policy platform for

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reforms, including ‘uniform child welfare legislation, national standards of care, accreditation of service providers and the appointment of a Federal Children’s Commissioner’ (ACWA: AAYPIC 1996). Interestingly, these are issues that are only now (2015) being addressed in Australia.

The early work of AAYPIC entailed establishing state networks, which by 1996 included all jurisdictions except for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). State governments in most cases provided the funding to facilitate regional AAYPIC activities. The groups embarked on an ambitious programme of fundraising and advocacy, which, in 1996, led to the ‘Share Our Future’ campaign, culminating in the launch of a notable publication entitled *Every childhood lasts a lifetime* (Owen 1996).<sup>1</sup> This book epitomized the aims of AAYPIC by presenting, in their own words, the personal stories of young people who had been in the care system.

In 1997, Andrew O’Brien, the then AAYPIC State Coordinator for New South Wales, clearly articulated the issues that needed to be tackled in achieving consumer participation by children and young people in care. He noted that just having a voice was different from the two-way process of real participation, and identified three steps that AAYPIC adopted to encourage involvement by young people: (a) ‘(creating) regular opportunities for children and young people to come together to identify, discuss and resolve issues of concern to them and the service provider’; (b) ‘providing young people with the skills and facilities needed to support their actions’; and (c) ‘creating a structure by which children and young people in care can participate in an ongoing capacity’ (1997, p. 57–58). These processes formed the basis for CREATE’s current mantra: *Connect to Empower to Change*.

In a review of the emerging consumer groups supporting young people in care in the 1990s, Mendes (1998) presented a valuable evaluation of AAYPIC in which he acknowledged the significant achievements of the fledgling group, but emphasized that the organization would need to be tested over time to determine how well it was able to represent all of those

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<sup>1</sup> The publication of this book represented a marker at the beginning of Jan Owen’s career that has focused on child welfare issues, the significance of which was recognized by the awarding to her of an honorary Doctor of Letters degree by the University of Sydney in 2014.

in care, both the younger children and the older cohort and care leavers, and also how well it could address the issue of accountability within child protection as a response to possible 'systems abuse'.

By 1999, AAYPIC and the state branches had achieved sufficient recognition in the child protection sector to become an incorporated body independent of ACWA. Young people in care were consulted to decide on an appropriate name for the new body. As a result, the CREATE Foundation came into existence on 1 July 1999, with separation funding of AUD\$12,000 from ACWA. While the New South Wales state government gave the newly formed organization credibility by incorporating information it provided into various discussion papers, questions were raised regarding CREATE's capacity, while operating as an 'insider' interest group, to effect policy change by engaging in 'cooperative rather than confrontational strategies' (Mendes 2002, p. 55). Parallels were drawn between CREATE and the more established Children's Welfare Association of Victoria, with the observation that when an interest group is dependent on substantial government funding, there is a low likelihood that it will issue harsh criticism of authorities. Current leadership at CREATE has been mindful of this tension, and while purposefully choosing to work within the system, has developed advocacy strategies more in keeping with the 'high profile insiders' identified by McKinney and Halpin (2007). These strategies will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

## CREATE's Mission

As with many contemporary organizations, CREATE clearly articulates its vision, mission and core principles. It aims to do all it can to create 'a better life for children and young people in care' (CREATE 2015a, p. 2). This mission is achieved by a tripartite process (*Connect to Empower to Change*) representing a continuum of activities designed to (a) engage children and young people, and through their participation, link them with their peers and decision-makers; (b) provide them with training to develop their skills and capacity to express their views, and give them opportunities to use those skills to build self-confidence; and (c) listen

to what the children and young people have to say, collect their wisdom, and share it with decision-makers to show where change for the better could occur in the care system.

CREATE follows a number of principles in striving for these goals, the main ones being that ‘Children and young people are at the centre of the work we do’, ‘meaningful participation is essential for engaging children and young people’ and ‘our advocacy is independent, non-partisan and evidence based’ (CREATE 2015a, p. 2). It is important to note that while CREATE’s successful connection activities have resulted in 12,728 children and young people currently being active members of *clubCREATE*, and, over the past 12 months, *Speak Up* and *CREATE Your Future* have empowered over 1200 participants (CREATE 2015a), the organization’s main focus is on systemic advocacy to improve the care system for all.

## CREATE’s Organizational Structure and Funding

From its humble beginnings, over the past 16 years, CREATE has developed into a not-for-profit company playing a significant role in the OOHHC sector by ensuring that the voices of children and young people are heard loud and clear. This longevity and level of influence have been achieved through sound governance and effective management. Under its Constitution, CREATE’s strategic direction is determined by a Board of Directors, the members of which are drawn from both the corporate and child protection sectors (see <http://create.org.au/who-we-are/our-people/> for biographies of current incumbents). A copy of the current *Strategic Plan 2015–17* is available at <http://create.org.au/publications/strategic-plan/>. It is Board policy that at least two Directors have a care experience; at present, three satisfy this criterion (including the Chairperson who spent part of his childhood at Fairbridge Farm,<sup>2</sup> and a relatively new Director who herself has recently completed a PhD researching pathways

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<sup>2</sup>Fairbridge Farm School was an institution that operated in western NSW between 1938 and 1974, which was intended to provide opportunities for children who had been living in poverty in Britain before migrating to Australia. The abuse experienced by many of these children is documented in David Hill’s 2008 book ‘The forgotten children: Fairbridge Farm School and its betrayal

CREATE Organisational Chart 2015

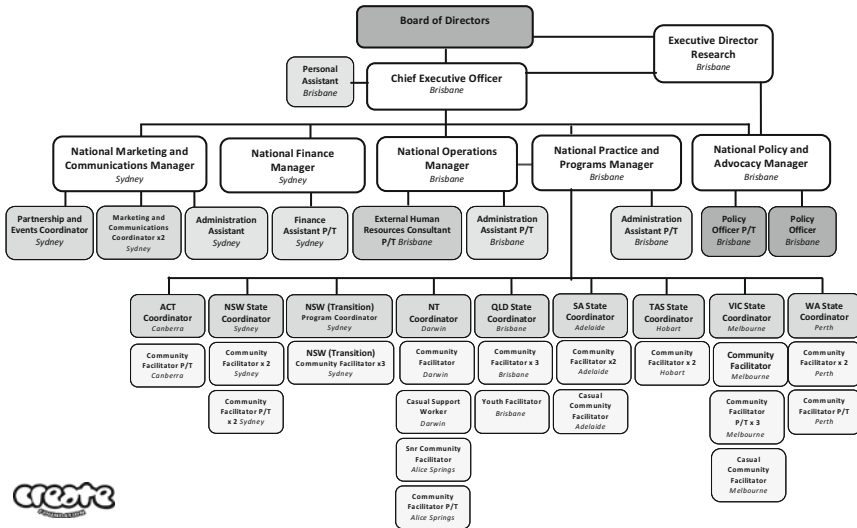


Fig. 14.1 Organizational structure of the CREATE Foundation as on October 2015

to higher education from out-of-home care). Governance and management are connected through having the Chief Executive Officer included as a voting Board member.

CREATE's current organizational structure, management role responsibilities, and staffing levels are shown in Fig. 14.1. A Leadership Committee comprising managers from the areas of Operations, Policy and Advocacy, Practice and Programs, Finance, and Marketing and Communications supports the CEO at the national level. In addition, each state and territory has its own Coordinator assisted by Community Facilitators, who work directly with the children and young people. In total, CREATE now employs 38 full-time equivalent staff throughout Australia, a relatively low number for a national organization.

As indicated in its 2014 Annual Review, CREATE obtains 67 per cent of its funding from state and federal government grants and service agreements.

of Britain's child migrants to Australia'. David was the first chairman of the CREATE Board, and currently is the organization's patron.

The remainder of the approximately AUD \$6M budget is derived from corporate sponsorship, donations, fee for service, and consultancies. This split enables CREATE to use the government support to conduct its connection activities and empowerment programmes, while using the non-government funding (particularly the long-term investment of supporters such as AMP Limited) to enable its research and advocacy to remain independent when presenting the views of children and young people.

## CREATE in the Global Advocacy Scene

Throughout the world, many non-government organizations and groups seek to meet the particular needs of vulnerable children and young people who cannot live with their birth parents. In a chapter of this limited length, it would be impossible to discuss all groups, even if their activities were well known. However, it is possible to broadly categorize these organizations, and identify characteristics that may help differentiate CREATE from similar groups supporting young people.

The development of advocacy groups for children and young people with a care background in the UK has been well documented by Stein (2011). He presents the highs and lows of the struggle in which young people from care were engaged, beginning in 1973 when *Ad-Lib* was formed, through *Who Cares?* followed by the *National Association of Young People in Care (NAYPIC)*, until the current incarnation as *A National Voice (ANV)*, a body formed in the same year that CREATE was incorporated (1999). When this group became fully independent in 2006, as Stein observed (p. 170), ‘For the first time in the history of the rights movement, an organization existed that not only represented and campaigned for young people in care, but also controlled its own administration and funding’. This fact places *ANV* at one pole of the advocacy continuum in being run by, and for, young people from care themselves. However, it is still dependent on government for financial support.

Other interest groups in the UK operate with professional Boards supported by young people. For example, the *National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF)*, a consortium of 81 services from local authorities designed to assist young people making the transition from

care to adulthood (Catch22 2015), is supported by the *Young People's Benchmarking Forum* (members aged over 16 years) that reports to the NLCBF and works to raise awareness of, and prioritize, issues affecting care leavers. This type of approach exemplifies a less direct model of young persons' participation. Organizations with similar structures exist in Scotland (*Who Cares? Scotland* where at least four Board members must have a care experience) and Ireland (*Voice of Young People in Care [VOYPIC]* in Northern Ireland incorporating 'Young Reps'; and *Empowering People in Care (EPIC)* in the Republic of Ireland that has a separate Youth Board).

The situation in the USA and Europe regarding advocacy groups for children and young people in care is less well documented, perhaps because of the greater diversity of regional jurisdictions comprising the larger entities and the plethora of local support groups and agencies. Discussions of the child welfare system (see for example, Pecora et al. 2011) tend to focus on the protections afforded to the child rather than on exploring how a young person's involvement can be harnessed to help improve the system. Large established organizations (such as the Child Welfare League of America) are influential in setting the national policy agenda concerning the welfare of all children; but the voices of children and young people can be heard only indirectly through the member agencies. However, other groups such as the *Children's Action Network*, the *National Foster Care Coalition*, and the *Foster Care Alumni of America* aim to provide opportunities for children and young people to be involved personally in advocacy and decision-making within the care system.

In Europe, a similar pattern emerges, with large organizations concerned with children's rights functioning to consolidate the actions of many smaller groups. For example, the Council of Europe in conjunction with the SOS Children's Villages International (2013) has produced guidelines for professionals to help them secure children's rights in an attempt to 'build a Europe for and with children'. Similarly, the Eurochild network strives to ensure that 'children's rights and well-being are at the heart of policymaking' (2014). Supporting such systemic advocates are the networks of *Independent Human Rights Institutions for Children (IHRICs)* and the *European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC)* (Thomas et al. 2011).

Recently, *Family for Every Child* (2015), a global alliance of members from 18 countries including Africa, South America, India, Indonesia, Russia, Middle East, and the UK, published the first international manifesto for delivering safe foster care, largely in developing countries, as part of its advocacy strategy. This included a major section on supporting children and young adults leaving foster care, in which it was suggested that 'low and middle income countries can learn from failures in high income countries by ensuring that support and follow-up services are in place and children are linked with their family of origin where appropriate' (p. 29).

It is difficult to compare CREATE's advocacy with the international groups because of the geographically large size of Australia and its relatively small population. However, following the previous discussion of activities of other organizations, a number of observations can be made.

The first concerns the role of children and young people. As with many groups, CREATE exists to access the voices of children and young people in the care system and ensure they are heard by decision-makers. At first, CREATE experimented with involving young people in the governance of the organization, expecting them to function in a highly structured 'corporate' environment. It soon became obvious, however, that the greatest contribution the young people could make required the free flow of ideas leading to issue identification in contexts they could control, rather than being constrained by adhering to a committee structure and process. This led to the current model of a formal governing Board acting on information and advice from young people provided through their monthly Youth Advisory Group meetings in each state and territory.

A second point concerns the type of advocacy CREATE can provide. Because of the small size of the organization, it is clear that it would not be possible for staff to undertake representation on behalf of individual children and young people regarding their specific treatment in the care system. Occasionally, young people may make a disclosure that requires an individual course of action; wherever possible, staff will refer these young people to bodies such as Children's Commissioners and Ombudspersons, which may have the capacity to deal with individual cases. Generally, CREATE attempts to gather the views of many young people to try to determine larger scale issues within jurisdictions. This is referred to as 'systemic advocacy'. CREATE staff attempt to provide a



supportive environment (through connection and empowerment) that will enable children and young people across Australia to share their stories. The collected voices can have great impact, as is evidenced by CREATE's work on leaving care.

The third area for comparison relates to funding. One of CREATE's core principles concerns 'independence', a need for the organization to be able to address issues young people raise, without fear or favour, particularly being free of government or other third-party influence. This can be achieved only by devoting considerable effort to obtaining unattached funding, largely through the generosity of corporate supporters. As indicated previously, CREATE currently obtains approximately one-third of its funding in this way, allowing it to produce valuable independent research to guide system improvement.

## CREATE and the Young People Leaving Care

CREATE provides young people in OOHC with two programmes to help prepare them for a successful life after care. *Speak Up* was designed as an empowerment experience comprising three levels from Introductory to Advanced that produces Young Consultants with the confidence and ability to share their views of the care system in public forums. The second programme, *CREATE Your Future*, is intended for young people aged 15–25 who are contemplating independent living. It provides a series of 14 workshops in which participants can acquire a range of life skills ranging from finding somewhere to live (familiarity with the rental market and its requirements) and obtaining a job (including self-presentation and interview skills), to using transport (public system or acquiring a driver's license) and producing nutritious meals (involving shopping, food preparation, and cooking).

Young people who have completed the programmes, particularly *Speak Up*, are given as many opportunities as possible to practice their skills and share their unique experiences with others. CREATE supports young people with a care experience until they reach 25 years by maintaining, if they wish, their membership of the *clubCREATE* network (at which time, they are encouraged to join the newly formed CREATE

alumni). *Speak Up* graduates tend to be influential at the monthly Youth Advisory Group (YAG) meetings held in each state and territory (although any child in care is entitled to attend these meetings, not just those who have completed programmes).

More importantly, young people are invited to participate at launches of CREATE's reports, and many are involved in caseworker training events where they are able to ensure that the young person's perspective is clearly articulated and understood within the system. The young people, when involved at this level, are paid a consultancy fee by CREATE to show that their contribution is valued by the organization.

## CREATE's Advocacy Strategies

CREATE employs many and varied forms of advocacy to present the voices of young people to the sector and decision-makers. In this section, examples of the most common and effective approaches will be given, including collaborations with governments, child welfare agencies, and other peak bodies; conferences; engagement with media (print and broadcast); and submissions to Commissions and Inquiries. In the next section, attention will focus on the strategy that has the most continuing influence, that is, research. It is through its research projects that CREATE is able to employ the core principle of listening to young people to obtain an understanding of issues that need to be addressed, and then responding with recommendations for policy and practice change in the OOHC system.

### Collaborations

It is well known that effective advocacy depends on the building of 'exchange relationships between organizational representatives and constituents, policymakers and the news media' (Berkhout 2013, p. 227). CREATE values having positive working relationships with governments, and agencies within the child protection sector. State governments assist by supporting connection and empowerment events, and by facilitating

contact with young people in the care system. The Australian government, while having limited responsibilities within child protection (as this is a state/territory matter), has contributed funding to two significant advocacy projects CREATE has undertaken in recent years concerning leaving care and sibling placement (CREATE 2010; McDowall 2015). In the former consultation, a total of 37 young people from around Australia shared their ideas regarding what could be done to improve the preparation, transition, and after-care independence phases of the journey, from care to emerging autonomy. The final report, published under the auspices of the then Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), presents a considered, comprehensive set of suggestions by young people who played a part in the establishment of the National Standards in Out-of-Home Care (introduced by FaHCSIA 2011), and CREATE's involvement in the National Framework Implementation Working Group.

CREATE is also concerned with establishing and maintaining connections with non-governmental organizations in the sector. In addition to communicating with children and young people as part of their regular professional activities, CREATE staff spend considerable time building relationships with their colleagues in department offices and child protection agencies. Key workers who respond by offering support can become part of the designated CREATE Mates network and receive newsletters and other relevant targeted information. CREATE relies on the goodwill of these workers to recommend its programmes to the children and young people for whom they are responsible.

## Conferences

A powerful way to achieve change in the system is to speak directly to decision-makers and stakeholders at conferences. Conferences represent a valuable vehicle for advocacy through information exchange during presentations as well as in out-of-session networking. Because of its national focus, notwithstanding a relatively small staff, CREATE attempts to have representatives either presenting the latest, most salient concerns of young people, or promoting the organization's activities at

major national conferences and symposia. Young people are invited to participate in and/or co-facilitate workshop sessions whenever possible. For example, CREATE regularly presents at Families Australia's *Child Aware Conference*, ACWA's annual conference, the National Foster Care and Kinship Care Conference, and the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Conference (conducted by the peak Indigenous body in child welfare), as well as responding positively to invitations to attend specialist forums.

In addition, CREATE has recently established a tradition of holding its own international biennial conference, the second having been conducted in 2015. The composition of delegates at this meeting is unique in Australia. About 400 people can attend; by design, one-third of these are children and young people, accompanied, when required, because of age, by their carers (who comprise another third), and the final group includes caseworkers, other professionals, and researchers. Activities are provided for each group appealing to a range of interests; variety is necessary since it was realized that some of the more academic papers might test the patience of young people. However, young people have demonstrated that they value the opportunity to be involved by participating in a variety of sessions including keynotes and panel discussions. The adult delegates benefit from gaining a broader understanding of many issues by seeing them from the young persons' perspective.

## Media

In addition to CREATE providing advocacy within the child protection sector, current management realizes that many decisions affecting the system require a certain political will, which is most likely to be influenced by an informed voting public. Clearly, harnessing the media in its many forms is an efficient way to connect with the general community. However, it is not sufficient to wait for the media to become interested in a story; work has to be done to ensure that, while information must be factual and accurate (not sensationalized), it is presented in a manner that will attract continued interest and hopefully lead to greater awareness and possibly a change of attitude in the recipient of the message. To

achieve this outcome, CREATE employs a media consultant who utilizes traditional print and broadcast channels (both radio and television) as well as postings on contemporary social media to promulgate the young persons' message within a general audience as well as niche sectors that could effect change.

CREATE's 2015 Annual Report (CREATE 2015a, p. 28) summarized the media coverage that this relatively small organization achieved in its most recent year of operation. A total of 74 media interviews were conducted involving 40 children and young people. This resulted in a total of 125 published items, including six television segments (e.g. Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Lateline and News 24), 22 radio broadcasts (including ABC *AM*), 29 print articles (several in major metropolitan papers, e.g. *Sydney Morning Herald*), and 68 online reports.

Mendes (2016) identified CREATE as one non-government advocacy group that has played an active role in releasing research reports and recommending policy reform to the media. While he claims that 'media reports do not appear to have played any significant role in driving policy reform' in the examples he cited, this view may be a little pessimistic. For example, reports such as that by Powell and Scanlon (2014) point to the media's 'key role in the construction of child abuse as a major social problem'. Locally, the action of minor political parties (e.g. the Greens in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory) in using the media to draw attention to data provided in CREATE's reports on transitioning from care has been influential in effecting recent changes that have occurred to leaving care policy in those jurisdictions (Barham 2012; Dyett 2012).

CREATE continues to explore how social media can be utilized for more direct, immediate contact with young people. This is an area that poses particular problems in terms of privacy concerns (Trepte 2015), but it may have beneficial applications in child protection (Thompson 2015). Given the ubiquitous nature of smart phones and Internet access, it would seem that anyone serious about accessing the contemporary voice of young people would need to explore and harness the affordances of this new media. CREATE's first exploration in this field has involved a collaboration with Queensland's Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, and Telstra to

produce a mobile app called SORTLI (an acronym from ‘sorting your life out’) that provides young people transitioning from care with useful information about employment, education, housing, life skills, and health (Queensland Government 2015).

## Submissions

Unfortunately, a common characteristic of child protection systems around the world is a tendency to be in a constant state of inquiry, experienced as they lurch from one scandal to the next (Gainsborough 2010). This situation certainly is found in Australia. As an indicator, it was noted in *Child Protection Australia 2011–12* (AIHW 2013, Appendix I) that at least 16 commissions or inquiries into child protection issues have been held since 1999, a list published before the holding of the recent Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, two Senate Inquiries (Out-of-Home Care; Grandparents Raising their Grandchildren), and the two Royal Commissions being conducted at present (Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; Child Protection Systems, South Australia).

CREATE, through its Policy and Advocacy Unit, devotes much time and effort to producing submissions, representing the views of children and young people in care, for these various inquiries. On many occasions, this dedication is rewarded when it becomes clear that recommendations contained within the submissions are considered seriously. An indication of how CREATE’s impact has increased over the past eight years can be found by comparing its input into the Wood Commission of Inquiry into child protection in New South Wales (2008) with the 2015 Senate (Community Affairs References Committee) Inquiry into out-of-home care. In the former, CREATE’s *Education Report Card* (2006) was mentioned three times, and comments from two young consultants were included; in the more recent inquiry, evidence from CREATE’s Policy and Advocacy Manager and four young consultants was cited extensively, covering a variety of issues in out-of-home care including the National Framework, stability and permanency, participation, complaints, planning, education, health, and family contact. CREATE’s

evidence featured significantly in three sections dealing specifically with transitioning from care (e.g., 4.94, 4.101, and 4.117).

Another prime example concerns CREATE's association with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Sexual Abuse (2015). The level of involvement requested by the Commission would seem another appropriate indicator of CREATE's influence in the sector. The CEO, Executive Director, and Leadership members have been invited to participate in three roundtables and workshops; the CEO and two Young Consultants were called to give evidence at one hearing; and two Commissioners conducted sessions at CREATE's 2015 Youth-for-Change conference at which young people had the opportunity to tell their stories.

Major recognition of the effectiveness of CREATE's submissions on behalf of children and young people in care, and of the organization's relevance, was expressed in the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission Report (2016) released in August. In this report, Recommendation 165 requires the South Australian government specifically to:

Reach an administrative arrangement with the CREATE Foundation to provide it with the names and contact details of children entering care and/or their carers (as appropriate).

## CREATE's Research into Transitioning from Care

Since 2008, CREATE has concentrated its efforts on issues confronting those leaving care and embarking on their transition to independent (or more appropriately interdependent) living. The action-research strategy adopted incorporated a variety of methodologies to identify problems within the system, and then to attempt systemic change in areas where improvements were clearly needed. Initial studies (McDowall 2008, 2009) reviewed the international leaving care literature as well as government legislation and policies relating to transitioning from care across all jurisdictions in Australia. To determine the impact of these policy expectations, a total of 635 young people who were either approaching the

age at which they would exit the care system or who were already trying to forge an independent existence were surveyed over the two studies. Important discrepancies were found between policy and practice.

It was recommended, following the first transitioning-from-care Report Card (McDowall 2008), that:

- National leaving care support standards be established;
- More integrated support systems be developed;
- Carers receive special training to address the stages of transition;
- Serious attention be directed to transition planning;
- Specialist Transition from Care officers be appointed;
- Outcomes of transition (costs and benefits) must be monitored more closely; and
- Particular attention must be directed to supporting indigenous care leavers.

Because only 164 young people were consulted in the 2008 study, it was decided to conduct a follow-up project in 2009, in which more young people from both in-care and post-care groups could participate, and government departments also would have the opportunity to discuss their policies regarding their provision of support for care leavers.

This second study (McDowall 2009) identified considerable variability in legislation and policies applying to the transitioning process across state and territory governments. Further, a number of findings from this survey mirrored concerns that had been reported internationally. Of the 196 in the post-care group, 35 per cent had completed Year 12, a total of 28 per cent were looking for work, 50 per cent had to leave their care placement on turning 18 years, 70 per cent were wholly or partially dependent on Centrelink (government) payments, 35 per cent were homeless (defined as being without safe or adequate housing for five consecutive nights) within the first year after leaving care, and 45 per cent (of males) had some connection with juvenile justice.

A major problem identified through this research concerns leaving care planning, with just over one-third (36 per cent) of those surveyed being aware of having any such plan that might help guide their future independent living (McDowall 2009). The few completed plans that



some governments had presented for review could be classified as either comprehensive, but incomprehensible, or simple, but lacking accountability. Clearly, more young people need to leave care with a useful plan for their future.

In an effort to increase the numbers with meaningful plans, and promote greater engagement of the young people in the planning process, CREATE embarked on its 'What's the plan?' project, a social marketing campaign (McDermott et al. 2005) designed to raise awareness of the need for planning, and to change the attitudes and behaviour of the young people, carers, and caseworkers involved, which hopefully would lead to more useful plans being produced. This programme, which employed a variety of promotional mechanisms to highlight the issues, ran for 12 months, at which time it was evaluated (McDowall 2011, 2012) to determine overall impact and establish which marketing elements seemed most effective. Of the 605 young people (15–17 years) surveyed, 31 per cent reported knowing about a personal leaving care plan. Although the overall result suggested no change in the incidence of planning, significantly more 17-year-olds (44 per cent) claimed to know about having a leaving care plan, with over 50 per cent of those in ACT, Victoria, and South Australia reporting such awareness. A similar finding was observed in the transitioning section of CREATE's more recent out-of-home sector review (McDowall 2013), with a national average of 65 per cent of 325 respondents indicating that someone had spoken with them about leaving care. These results indicate more work needs to be done to improve planning; however, they do give some encouragement that interventions such as this may have some impact if maintained over a longer time span.

These approaches led to CREATE's current leaving care project. Research indicated that more tangible assistance was needed if any significant change in planning behaviour of caseworkers with young people was to be achieved. With the support of all state and territory governments, as a key action under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020, CREATE produced the nationally consistent *Go Your Own Way* (GYOW) kits in consultation with young people in care, and planned to distribute these to all 17-year-olds identified by governments as transitioning over the 12 months from March

2014. This resource includes a leaving care plan template to be completed by the young person together with the responsible caseworker. The effectiveness of the kits in facilitating planning was evaluated in 2016. Even though all 17-year-old care leavers in 2014 were eligible to receive a kit, only 52% received this resource because of the variable, uncontrolled, inconsistent kit distribution practices adopted by governments. However, significantly more of those who received a kit knew about their leaving care plan than did those who had to prepare for independence using other strategies (McDowall, 2016).

## CREATE's Strengths and Limitations

Measuring the impact of an advocacy group such as CREATE can be difficult because, as Lowery (2013) observed, such research often produces null findings. He found from meta-analytic studies into the impact of advocacy organizations that they were likely to report significant findings only about 20 per cent of the time (p. 18). It is essential that the areas of influence being investigated are clearly identified. Pedersen (2013) suggested three measures that can be considered: (a) the group's activity; (b) agenda-setting influence; and (c) legislative influence. She noted strong correlations between measures in these areas, even though legislative influence appeared more difficult to measure consistently than did group activity.

Much of the literature on advocacy evaluation concerns the effectiveness of individual advocacy, and hence does not relate directly to CREATE's focus in systemic advocacy. However, the three overarching features of an effective independent child protection advocacy service, as articulated by the National Children's Bureau (2013) in the UK, still seem relevant for CREATE and highlight the organization's strengths:

- [The] advocacy is child-led and child-controlled;
- The independent advocate is able to take all necessary action to ensure the child's views are heard and their rights upheld; and
- The independent advocacy service makes a positive difference to children's lives (NCB 2013, p. 7).

CREATE's advocacy certainly is child-led—not by individuals, but by the collective voice. The model of seamless engagement from *connect to empower to change* ensures young people are given every chance to be heard and to influence decision-makers. Perhaps, the greatest protection CREATE affords young people with a care experience is that its advocacy is independent of governments and support agencies. Being national, CREATE can address differential treatment across jurisdictions and make a positive contribution to the lives of young care leavers throughout Australia.

Another strength of CREATE as an independent advocacy organization is that it has the flexibility to use a variety of methods to bring its positive message of the potential of young people to public awareness. In addition to its more traditional approaches that have been discussed, it also disseminates good news stories about the experiences of children and young people in care through its *clubCREATE* magazines. At its recent national conferences, it featured a photographic exhibition displaying portraits that young people with a care experience had taken (after receiving a little professional training in using cameras) of individuals who had achieved a level of personal success in various fields of endeavour (including business, sport, academia, and culture), and who had also been in care. This *Power Within* exhibition was designed to show that no stigma should be associated with a care experience, and that, with support, wonderful opportunities are available to anyone, from any background, with the drive to succeed. The work has been exhibited in Canberra, Melbourne, Hobart, and Brisbane to a broad-based audience. A copy of the publication accompanying this show that includes the images, biographies of the participants, and reflections on the process by the young person is available on CREATE's website (CREATE 2015b).

One of CREATE's greatest challenges is that although it receives financial support from governments to conduct its connect and empower programmes, particularly *CREATE Your Future* for care leavers, 'privacy constraints' are often invoked to limit access to young people who are entitled to, and would benefit from, the programmes. As an example, CREATE's recent campaign of supplying leaving care resources (GYOW Kits) to all 17-year-olds ageing out of the care system became problematic when state and territory governments would not enable CREATE to distribute the kits because of privacy issues

concerning provision of the contact details for the young people entitled to receive them. Consequently, CREATE has no direct knowledge of who received a kit, and departments apparently have not kept accurate records of the distribution. Therefore, in conducting the planned follow-up evaluation of the resource, CREATE will have to search broadly for care leavers (rather than target those who received a kit), and then determine whether the young person's transition planning was facilitated through utilizing a GYOW Kit.

It would be ideal for all children and young people, on coming into care, to be registered as members of CREATE, and be entitled to the continuing support this Foundation provides. If they actively do not want to be connected with CREATE, they can opt out. However, at present, they are required to opt in. It has long been recognized (Samuelson and Zeckhauser 1988) that there is a *status quo* bias in decision-making; whatever the current situation is, it is likely to be maintained. It would be preferable to ensure that the *status quo* provides ongoing support to encourage young people to strive for their aspirations, rather than imposing isolation and exclusion.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to illustrate aspects of CREATE's activities in supporting children and young people in out-of-home care, with special attention to those exiting the care system. Many strategies have been identified for assisting those in transition to achieve their aspirations; but more work needs to be done. CREATE envisions a situation in which children and young people in out-of-home care, irrespective of where they live in Australia, all have the same rights, levels of support, and opportunities. Its leading role promoting the leaving care strategy of the National Forum for Protecting Australia's Children is an important way of addressing this quest for consistency and fairness.

CREATE's model of Connect to Empower to Change has stood the test of time in terms of its effectiveness in meeting the needs of children and young people in, and leaving, care, as well as enhancing their capacity to be heard. Obviously, the degree of funding that can be obtained

through the hard work of the organization's staff, and the generosity of governments and corporate supporters, is a key factor in determining the number of children and young people with whom CREATE can connect, and who consequently feel empowered and confident enough to speak out to change the system. However, another factor is government recognition; given CREATE's unique position in the out-of-home care sector in Australia, it would seem an appropriate time for authorities to re-examine the status of this organization in terms of establishing information-sharing protocols, at least for basic contact details, so that CREATE's vision that '*All children and young people with a care experience have the chance to reach their full potential (italics added)*' can be realized.

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