

MEDIA RELEASE

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creating a better life
for children and young
people in care

UK YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE SHOCKED AT AUSTRALIA'S LEAVING CARE AGE

Australian foster kids face homelessness due to practice of withdrawing support at age 18. Young people in the UK and Ireland can receive support until at least the age of 21.

[Brief background information] CREATE Foundation is the national consumer body representing the voices of children and young people with an out-of-home care experience (including kinship care, foster care and residential care). CREATE Foundation is currently in the middle of a four weeklong cultural exchange program with sister advocacy organisations in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Australian children and young people in state care are forced to live independently at the age of 18 years. In many cases this comes after a young person has experienced years of trauma and unsettled placements. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, young people who have experienced similar setbacks receive government support to at least 21 years, and in many case to 25 years or even 27 years.

CREATE Foundation Advocacy and Communications Officer Peter Melrose is currently visiting a number of services in Northern Ireland and speaking to staff and young service users in that region as part of CREATE's cultural exchange program, which includes looking at how the services and support in Australia meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people.

CREATE CEO Jacqui Reed expressed admiration and respect for the jurisdictions that Peter is visiting, and expressed a strong belief that young people should be supported to leave care at 21 years with after care support provided to 25 years. "Overseas young people and Support Workers are often visibly shocked when they learn that in Australia, you leave care at just 18 years of age", she said.

"Young people in the United Kingdom have asked how Australia's most vulnerable children are able to access vital mental health support, or education as well as family support and employment training when they have to leave care at 18" she said.

Northern Ireland has spent millions of pounds over the past several years bringing its child protection system into line with UNHCR provisions. "Every young person in care in Northern Ireland can expect to be cared for and supported right through to the age of 21 years at a minimum, this includes a range of supported and semi-independent accommodation options, mental health and further education support and a long transition process" Ms Reed said.

"All this is being done in the context of the country's poor economic growth and a range of additional complexities that we don't face in Australia", she said. "Nevertheless, they are focussed on positive outcomes for their looked-after children. They recognise that the state's most vulnerable need the same support you would expect to give to your own children," she said. "And if they can do it, so can we".

In Australia, 35% of young people who transition from care at age 18 years are expected to experience homelessness the first year of transitioning, with no organised support to help them" Ms Reed said.

Several Australian states have recently decided to legislate to increase the leaving care age to 21 years. "This is a positive step, but it is moving slowly and in the interim young people remain at significant risk" Ms Reed said. "We have got to do better, and catch up to the rest of the world".

For further comment from CREATE's CEO Jacqui Reed and/or a young person with care experience please call Andrea Doney 0402050418 and andrea@admarcoms.com.au

Quotes for use as needed

"I can't believe in Australia, you have to fend for yourself at 18. If I was out of care at 18, I don't know what I would have done, I'd be homeless and would not get the support I need" Cabhan aged 19 Northern Ireland

[Peter] explained that in Australia you leave care at 18 and all the young people in the residential house (which was a supported accommodation for care leavers) were stunned. 'What happens if you're just not ready' asked one young woman. "I am nearly 19 and need help with everything. I can't imagine having no support"

Key statistics on the care sector in Australia:

- 47,915 children were in-out-home care across Australia at 30 June 2017
- 35% of young people experience homelessness within the first year of leaving care
- 46% of boys with care experience have had contact with the juvenile justice system
- 29% of young people who have experienced out-of-home are unemployed
- 36% of children and young people are split from their brothers and sisters in care
- 35% of young people in care have 5 or more caseworkers during their time in care
- 67% of young people in care are not aware of leaving care plans

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