



creating a better life
for children and young
people in care

Establishing a 10-Year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing

Submission to the Victorian Government

April 2021

CREATE Foundation

A 325-327, Queensberry Street
North Melbourne, VIC 3051

T 03 9918 0002

E vic@create.org.au



Introduction

CREATE thanks the Victorian Government for the opportunity to comment on the *10-year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing* (the Strategy). CREATE is the National peak body representing the voices of children and young people with a care experience. Current data (based on the most recent reporting period of 30 June 2018 to 30 June 2019), indicates there were 44,906 children and young people in care in Australia, with 8490 from Victoria (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020). CREATE's mission is to create a better life for these children and young people in care and improve the outcomes for those who exit the care system.

CREATE strongly believes that young people with a care experience deserve the same life opportunities to thrive as their peers, and that homelessness and inappropriate housing are unacceptable. Sadly, our research has found that young people with a care experience are more vulnerable to experiencing homelessness once they exit state care (CREATE, 2020a; McDowall, 2009; McDowall, 2020). Having safe, secure, and affordable housing is crucial for a successful transition from care into independent living. It is linked to better health and wellbeing outcomes and offers a secure foundation for future social and economic participation.

We commend the Victorian government's recent commitment to extend care and support until 21 (Premier of Victoria, 2020) enabling young people to gradually transition from care. However, CREATE notes that more must be done to strengthen the leaving-care process related to accommodation and housing for care leavers. Our responses to the Strategy's Discussion Questions have been informed by the voices of care-experienced young people who have participated in CREATE's Youth Advisory Groups and research.

Responses to Discussion Paper Questions


People at the Centre

We want your input on what actions we should take to ensure we seek, hear and respond to people who need and use social and affordable housing, so that people are at the centre of a future social and affordable housing system.

CREATE advocates that the Victorian government include participation and the voices of those with a care experience in the design and implementation of actions under the Strategy. CREATE believes that meaningful participation through listening and responding to the views of children and young people in out-of-home care systems is a cornerstone of best practice (CREATE, 2019; CREATE, 2020a). The right for children and young people to participate in decisions that affect their lives is enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nation's *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989).

Young people should also be included in review processes to ensure services are delivering on the actions as intended. We support the need for regular large-scale surveys of public housing residents to be conducted as stated in the Discussion paper (Homes Victoria, 2021). Doing so will ensure that residents who use these housing services are able to share their views and experiences of safety and security, connection to community, and community diversity allowing the Victorian government to consider further planning and service improvement.

However, CREATE recommends that alternative methods to seek feedback must be considered to reach the diverse audience of people who need and use social and affordable housing. CREATE often hears from children and young people in care that greater awareness and promotion is needed so they can be involved, and that approaches and engagement strategies must be accessible (i.e., easy to understand and user-friendly; CREATE, 2020a).



CREATE has existing consultation processes through Youth Advisory Groups, Think Tanks, *Hour of Power* sessions, consultations, and its major research reports (McDowall, 2013; McDowall, 2018; McDowall, 2020). Such processes allow us to hear the voices and experiences of children and young people in care and those up to 25 years who have already exited the system. We would welcome future consultation opportunities to inform the development and refinement of the Strategy focusing on those who are preparing to transition from care and care leavers to better identify their specific housing needs.


Pathways

What actions will enable people to access social housing, sustain their tenancies, and move between different housing options as their needs change?

CREATE's latest report, *Transitioning to adulthood from out-of-home care: Independence or interdependence?* (McDowall, 2020) found that 49%, of a total cohort of 325 young people, had moved from their carers' household when their care orders expired at age 18. Among this group, only 19% felt that they were notified well in advance and given adequate time to prepare for transitioning. The findings also indicated that while most young people moved into supported accommodation or found their own flat or house, about 17% were homeless immediately after leaving care. Unfortunately, the number of young people who reported being homeless increased to 30% within their first year of leaving care (McDowall, 2020). Reasons for this often include ineffective care planning; limited supply and diversity of appropriate housing; long waiting lists for social housing; a lack of financial, material, and emotional resources; relationship breakdowns; and emotional and mental health challenges (CREATE, 2020b; Muir et al., 2019).

CREATE commends the Victorian government's commitment to supporting children and young people in care until 21 through *Home Stretch* and *Better Futures* to ensure a more gradual and supported transition process (Premier of Victoria, 2020). Because the *Better Futures* program was only introduced last year across the whole state, there is still a high number of young people aged 18–21 who are not eligible to access this service. There must be increased support for those who have slipped through the gap between the introduction of the *Better Futures* program. CREATE advocates that the Victorian government consider extending specialised post-care support services to young people until 25 years. This should be extended to those placed in permanent care and informal kinship care, as they are not currently eligible to receive support from *Better Futures*.

Further findings of CREATE's recent post-care report, in relation to leaving care planning, found that almost half of the respondents had spoken with their caseworker about their transition plan, but 26% had not spoken with anyone. Only 36% indicated that they had a transition plan, and 39% of these had been quite involved in its preparation. Young people also expressed that they were concerned about financial difficulties, homelessness, and their mental health (i.e., feelings of uncertainty and loneliness) (McDowall, 2020). To ensure that care leavers are prepared for a successful transition, CREATE advocates that improvements to leaving-care preparations are needed, especially if young people decide that they do not wish to and/or are unable to remain with their carer until 21. CREATE believes that greater efforts to ensure genuine participation of young people in their leaving-care plans and ensuring that these plans are updated and reviewed to reflect an individual's current situation and wishes will be more useful for care leavers as their plans change (CREATE, 2019). Genuine participation should also include supporting young people to understand and make decisions about the different housing options and types of assistance they are eligible to access. Again, extending the provision of *Better Futures* for care leavers until 25 years would help safeguard young people for a longer period of time during this critical transition phase if their circumstances change and they need to move houses.



Despite being identified as a priority group on the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement* (Council on Federal Financial Relations, 2018), young people who exit care are experiencing unacceptably long wait times in receiving social housing. This has been an issue for many years and requires urgent attention which can be addressed by increasing housing supply (Johnson et al., 2010). Options to help achieve this can be facilitated by investing further in social housing or supported accommodation specifically for care leavers; building new housing stock; renovating older homes and/or negotiating agreements with owners of private rentals. Tenancy reform must also be addressed, and ensuring that ongoing funding for Specialist Homelessness Services is provided so that these essential services are properly resourced to meet community demand (CREATE, 2020b).

Young people must also be supported to maintain their tenancies by being able to access social support such as help with job-searches, or financial assistance specific for care leavers that enable them to access housing. Better awareness of, and access to, TILA (a one-off Transition to Independent Living Allowance) might help with this process. In CREATE's post-care report, 62% had heard of TILA but only 43% had applied for this support. Young people reported that their chances of receiving TILA was more successful when their caseworkers were involved in the application process (McDowall, 2020).

What actions will support people to find and obtain an affordable home?

CREATE believes there needs to be a range of actions to support care leavers not only find and obtain an affordable home, but also afford rent and alleviate administrative challenges that contribute to navigating support services, or private rental access (i.e., a lack of rental history or references).


At CREATE Youth Advisory Groups, young people have reported that accessing and navigating Centrelink is challenging when you need identification because of the difficulties in accessing birth certificates and other personal records. A similar finding in CREATE's post-care report highlighted that while two thirds of care leavers sought copies of their personal records, 42% did not actually receive a response (McDowall, 2020). Attention must be brought to the unique challenges facing young care leavers who wish to access private rentals through the provisions of rental subsidies. Part of this requires addressing the difficulties in securing references or finding guarantors to support their housing applications.

I had 12-month youth accommodation arranged where I rented a share house for 12 months with another teenager, and after that was up I found it extremely difficult to find other accommodation because no one wanted to lease accommodation to a teenager that had no parents to sign as a guarantor and especially a child in care that has come into the real estate with a support worker. It was always assumed that I would be wild and party, and trash the house. Which I never did at any stage.

(Female, 23 years; McDowall, 2020)

The process of assessing housing need and the process of housing allocation itself should be accompanied by culturally safe and age-appropriate administrative support for young people so they can navigate appropriate housing services. This is particularly important for those who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; culturally or linguistically diverse young people; those living with a disability, mental health, or emotional difficulties; young parents; those who enter the youth justice system; or those who leave care early. Housing services should also ensure young people understand application forms and help them both with completing them and retrieving supporting documentation. Social housing application forms could also be updated to include a question that identifies applicants with a previous care experience to ensure they receive extra administrative support (CREATE, 2020b).

The need for improving the leaving-care planning process has already been discussed earlier, however, CREATE would like to highlight additional strategies for consideration. A recent report by the Australian



Housing and Urban Research Institute has reported that early intervention approaches in a young person's life can be effective in supporting them on their housing journey (MacKenzie, et al., 2020). This includes having access to specialised accommodation for care leavers (e.g., Youth Foyers) or other supported accommodation that provides wraparound support for young people to finish school, pursue further training or university degrees, and provide a stable base while job-seeking. Place-based approaches through schools¹ have been found to help decrease early school leaving and possible homelessness (MacKenzie, et al., 2020). If this strategy is explored, CREATE would support flexible methods that provide education in residential care houses for those disengaged from school.

Partnerships

How do we strengthen our partnership approach to build a stronger and more effective social and affordable housing system?

CREATE believes partnership approaches must be strengthened through cross-sector collaboration and information-sharing (MacKenzie et al., 2020). Better cross-sector collaboration and information-sharing may help streamline administrative processes to eliminate challenges in securing safe and secure housing, particularly for young people with a care experience who may not possess or have access to personal records or identification documents (e.g., birth certificate). Likewise, enhanced partnerships within the community service sector through warm referrals, “*No wrong door approaches*”, and streamlined communication (e.g., co-design of collaborative work between out-of-home care, Better Futures, Specialist Homelessness Services, and Centrelink) would provide a better safety and support network to improve shared outcomes for care leavers (MacKenzie et al., 2020). Not only should this be discussed with workers in the sector, but crucially also co-designed and co-implemented with care-experienced young people.

Engagement

How can we engage with you as we develop new initiatives over the course of this strategy?

CREATE welcomes opportunities to partner with the Victorian government and be involved in developing new initiatives over the course of this Strategy. CREATE can utilise existing consultation processes, for example our Youth Advisory Groups or Ministerial Youth Advisory Groups; be funded to conduct think tanks or other consultations with young people with a care experience; or extend on the Transitions from care Youth Expert Advisory Group (YEAG previously HSYEAG).

Conclusion

CREATE advocates that children and young people are supported to exercise their right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives, particularly for something as important as having a safe and secure place to live once exiting care. It is the government's responsibility as corporate parents to ensure that those with a care experience are given the same opportunities to thrive and are supported through this process so that they have improved life outcomes and do not become vulnerable to experiencing homelessness.

CREATE recommends the following actions for consideration in the plan:

- Partner with CREATE to facilitate opportunities for consultation with care-experienced young people to develop new initiatives over the course of the Strategy;
- Ensure young people are actively involved in their leaving-care plans, and are supported to secure accommodation and housing once they leave care;
- Increase housing supply to meet demand, and reduce waiting lists for social housing;

¹ Place-based approaches are collaborative strategies that achieve shared community outcomes tailored to local community needs.

- Extend specialised post-care support services to care experienced young people, including those on Permanent Care orders, until 25 years;
- Streamline administrative processes by facilitating cross-sector collaboration, information-sharing and warm referrals to eliminate challenges that young people face when accessing housing.

Thank you again for the opportunity to respond to the *10-year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing*. Please contact Cathy Carnovale, VIC State Coordinator on 03 9918 0002 if you require any additional information.


Yours sincerely,



Cathy Carnovale
VIC State Coordinator
CREATE Foundation

References

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2020). *Child protection Australia 2018-19*. AIHW. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/3a25c195-e30a-4f10-a052-adbfd56d6d45/aihw-cws-4.pdf.aspx?inline=true>
- Council on Federal Financial Relations. (2018). *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- CREATE. (2019). *Position Paper: Participation*. CREATE Foundation. Retrieved from <https://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/CREATE-Position-Paper-Participation.pdf>
- CREATE. (2020a). *Children and Young People as Decision-makers: Encouraging Participation in Out-of-Home Care*. CREATE Foundation. Retrieved from https://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CRE4299_CREATE_BestPracticeResource_A4_2020web.pdf
- CREATE. (2020b). *Position Paper: Priority Access to Housing*. CREATE Foundation. Retrieved from <https://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CREATE-Position-Paper-Housing.pdf>
- Homes Victoria. (2021). *Establishing a 10-year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing*. Victorian Government. Retrieved from https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/hdp.au.prod.app.vic-engage.files/7216/1275/1586/2006743_Q_sector_discussion_paper_WEB.pdf
- Johnson, G., Natalier, K., Mendes, P., Liddiard, M., Thoresen, S., Hollows, A., & Bailer, N. (2010). *Pathways from out-of-home care*. AHURI Final Report No. 147. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. Retrieved from https://www.ahuri.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/2194/AHURI_Final_Report_No147_Pathways-from-out-of-home-care.pdf
- MacKenzie, D., Hand, T., Zufferey, C., McNelis, S., Spinney, A., & Tedmanson, D. (2020). *Redesign of a homelessness service system for young people*. AHURI Final Report 327. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. Retrieved from https://www.ahuri.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/60631/AHURI-Final-Report-327-Redesign-of-a-homelessness-service-system-for-young-people.pdf

- 
- McDowall, J. J. (2009). *CREATE Report Card: Transitioning From Care: Tracking Progress*. CREATE Foundation. Retrieved from https://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/05.-CREATE-Report-Card_Transitioning-From-Care-Tracking-Progress_November-2009.pdf
- McDowall, J. J. (2013). *Experiencing out-of-home care in Australia: The views of children and young people*. CREATE Foundation. Retrieved from <https://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2013-CRE065-F-CREATE-Report-Card-2013-Web-File-web.pdf>
- McDowall, J. J. (2018). *Out-of-Home Care in Australia: Children and Young People's Views After Five Years of National Standards*. CREATE Foundation. Retrieved from <https://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CREATE-OOHC-In-Care-2018-Report.pdf>
- McDowall, J. J. (2020). *Transitioning to adulthood from out-of-home care: Independence or interdependence?* CREATE Foundation.
- Muir, S., Purtell, J., Hand, K., & Carroll, M. (2019). *Beyond 19: The longitudinal study on leaving care Wave 3 Research Report: Outcomes for young people leaving care in Victoria*. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Retrieved from https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/1812_b18_wave_3_final_report.pdf
- Premier of Victoria. (2020). *Supporting Young Victorians – And Their Future*. Retrieved from Premier of Victoria: <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/supporting-young-victorians-and-their-future>
- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

About CREATE

CREATE Foundation is the national peak consumer body for children and young people with an out-of-home care experience. We represent the voices of over 45,000 children and young people currently in care, and those who have transitioned from care up to the age of 25. Our vision is that all children and young people with a care experience reach their full potential. Our mission is to create a better life for children and young people in care.

To do this we:

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

We achieve our mission by providing a variety of activities and programs for children and young people in care, and conducting research and developing policy to help us advocate for a better care system.