Improving Out Of Home Care
Report on the Ministerial Out Of Home Care Forum

Listening to the experience of young people
Working with NGOs, schools, police and partners
Changing the system for the young people we serve
Improving outcomes across a lifetime
More frequent and proactive caseworker visits to identify early the signs of placement breakdown.

Data linkage - to aid in info sharing & prevent children having to tell their stories multiple times.

Support between placements:
- Introductions of young person to new family prior to getting there e.g. send video file new family <-> young person.
- Ask young person what they think is best for them.

Issues:
- System vs. flexibility (needs of child)
- Inclusion within the system
- Caring for children vs. clients
- Lack of service co-ordination (interagency)
- Care of child when placement breaks
- Reality of community involvement.

Ideas:
- Focus on system vs. focus on child.

Solutions:
- The child (not the system) should be at the centre of every decision.
- The rules can be flexible to support the child.
- Professionalise foster care.
- Provide appropriate time of placement breakdown.
- Person-centred language (report it will be read in the future by someone.
- Comprehensive records keeping of all client records - kept centrally and easily accessed.
- Data hub (learn from private sectors).

Ideas:
- App - carers - kids in care (Information)
- Mandatory career training + development (ongoing)

Support between placements:
- Listen to young person more consider their views.
- Ask what they want, ask what has happened and what could prevent this placement or the next one breaking down.

Ideas:
- Recruitment & Quality carers
- Vocational vs job in community
- Career training
As Minister for Family and Community Services I invited more than 250 people to a forum in Sydney to discuss the Out Of Home Care system and its impact on the lives of many in NSW. Our child protection system is currently geared towards removing children and young people, rather than working with families to keep children safely at home. In NSW 20 years ago, just fewer than 6,000 children and young people were in care. Next year, this number is projected to reach 22,400.

The aim of the forum was to bring together those impacted by Out Of Home Care – young people and their families, carers, practitioners and experts – to share in the experiences and realities of a system we all know needs to change.

A particularly moving part of the forum was listening to careleavers John and Claudia who shared their experiences with us. Although separated by more than 20 years, their contact with Out Of Home Care highlighted that change has been too slow and not good enough.

We all know the facts. Children and young people who experience care continue to have poorer health, wellbeing and educational outcomes across their lifetimes. Tragically, they also experience homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system at far higher rates than other young people.

Urgent reform of the child protection and Out Of Home Care systems is needed to give more children safe homes for life and stem the unsustainable numbers of children being taken into and remaining in statutory care.

We all have a responsibility to keep children and young people safe, but just as importantly, we must work collaboratively and consistently towards their wellbeing and support them to have the bright futures they deserve.
Executive summary

The Ministerial Out Of Home Care Forum sought to hear about the experiences and the needs of young people in care to develop solutions and drive change to improve the system.

The Forum was facilitated by Jenny Brockie and brought together young people, carers, non-government organisations (NGOs), peak bodies, academic institutions and Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) caseworkers and staff to share their experiences and ideas for improvement. Presentations, panel discussions and question and answer sessions generated ideas and insights into the Out Of Home Care system, which focussed on:

- the experiences of young people
- understanding the needs of Aboriginal young people in care
- educational barriers
- the impact of criminalisation of young people in care
- the impact of trauma and need for mental health supports
- carer’s perspectives on what makes a good care experience
- aftercare and future planning for young people.

In total, 293 people attended and participated in two charrette sessions to gather ideas and insights about how to improve the service system.
Listening to young people in care

In this session, we listened to careleavers John and Claudia, as well as young people in the audience, as they shared their experiences of the care system. Common issues and themes emerged around the system’s inadequacies, including lack of communication and access to files, placement moves, future planning and access to health, education and housing.

“ I should have been given the opportunity as a child for someone to really listen and hear what I was saying.”

Claudia

Ongoing connections and relationships. The system needs to better acknowledge the importance of, and facilitate regular interactions with, siblings and birth family for children and young people in care.

The right support at the right time. Young people want to see their caseworkers more often. We need to ensure caseworkers visit children in care proactively and engage young people in decision making about their lives. Communication and honesty needs to be strengthened between children, caseworkers and carers.

Permanency and security. Research highlights the negative effect repeated moves and placement or caseworker changes have on young people in care. This instability can worsen the effects of pre-care instability and trauma.

“I have had 13 different placements over my 15 years in care…when I look at what that has done to me I feel a profound sense of loneliness.”

Forum participant

Origins and identity. Young people in care should have access to age-appropriate information about their lives, including their history, origins and why they couldn’t safely stay with their parents. Record keeping needs to be improved to ensure children’s lives are accurately documented for them. Importantly, information needs to be shared with young people in an appropriate and honest way and FACS needs to improve their facilitation of this.
Aboriginal young people in care

Aboriginal children and young people need specialised support to ensure cultural connection. Dana Clarke, AbSec Chairperson and CEO of Burrun Dalai, presented this session on how Aboriginal Out Of Home Care service providers support spirit and identity in care. The audience also explored how connection to culture, community and family can improve outcomes for Aboriginal children.

Education – making the grade

Young people in care need to have hope for themselves and their future. Specialised support for education helps build a successful future. Cheryl McBride, Chairperson Public Schools Principals Principals Forum and Lila Mularczyk, Principal Merrylands High School, spoke of the challenges that children and young people in care, their carers and their schools face in supporting educational attainment.

Connection to culture, community and family. Aboriginal children need to be placed with Aboriginal carers, when possible, and all carers of Aboriginal children need to follow cultural care plans, specific to each child and their family. Accurate family trees need to be made and regularly updated to ensure family networks are maintained.

Cultural care planning needs to be improved. Cultural care planning should start early with the young person and their mob involved whenever possible.

Education support and pathways. Education remains a challenge for many young people in care without specialised support. Customised intensive support for young people in Out Of Home Care is important to help them progress in primary school and high school. More deliberate pathways and supports are needed for young people to pursue TAFE and University education.
Pre-emptive planning and early mitigation is important to ensure children and young people in Out Of Home Care are supported in their education journey and to improve educational outcomes.

Planning and exchange of information. Planning and exchange of information is required between schools, carers and the agencies involved in delivering support and care to ensure the best outcomes.

Intensive support while in care and after is required to divert young people from the criminal justice system, including future planning, developing support networks and early mitigation.

Educational pathways. A lack of educational attainment can lead young people who have been in Out Of Home Care into the criminal justice system, whether as adults or young people. Ensuring educational achievement is key to supporting young people to stay out of trouble.

Trauma and mental health

Helping children and young people who have experienced trauma can be challenging. Dr Howard Bath, former NT Children’s Commissioner, psychologist and consultant, spoke about how to best meet the multiple needs of children who have experienced trauma to promote healing and improve outcomes across a child’s lifetime.

Providing safety. Providing safety, and an environment that supports safety, is paramount and must include physical, emotional, social and relationship support. Therapeutic care is a key component of trauma-informed engagement with young people.

Criminalisation of children in care

Children and young people in care are already vulnerable members of our community and a criminal record dramatically impacts their lives. Deb Munro, General Manager of Impact Youth Services, highlighted the need for a coordinated approach to change the overrepresentation of young people in care from entering the criminal justice system.

Working together to improve outcomes. It is important to establish strong partnerships with Police to reduce their contact with young people, particularly those in residential care. Limiting young people in care’s experience with the criminal justice system through positive engagement and partnerships is key.
Early intervention. Early support is required for children and young people to develop coping strategies and manage turbulent emotions that can occur as a consequence of trauma. FACS and other agencies caring for children and young people need to better engage services to provide care as early as possible.

Carer training. Carers need appropriate training and support for dealing with trauma. Carers need to be informed about behavioural problems and trained to deal with them.

Recognising intergenerational trauma. It is important to acknowledge intergenerational trauma and to have supports in place to address and resolve this.

Perspective of the carers

Carers James and Janet, along with young person in care Gemma, led this panel discussion on what makes a good care experience. Themes of security, stability and support to meet complex needs and commitment to the child were shared by the panel and highlighted through the audience discussion.

Caring doesn’t stop when the person turns 18. Carers offer a stable and secure place for young people to call home and are a crucial support network as young people begin their adult lives. Maintaining relationships with former carers and other important people in young people’s lives needs to be a priority.

Intensive initial support. Intensive support is required for both the child/young person and the carer upon initial placement. Carers need to feel supported and understand they can ask for help.

“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but when faced with courage, need not be lived again.”

Dr Howard Bath, child welfare expert

“What does this child you are trying to help actually need?”

Young care leaver
Ongoing support and training.
Good casework support is important for carers. Honest communication between caseworkers and carers needs to be ongoing. Carer networks and training also provide vital support to carers.

Facilitating family connections. It is vital that children and young people in care are helped to maintain contact with siblings and family, when it is safe and they wish to do so. Listening to the needs of children and young people remains central to this.

Planning must involve the young person.
Young people need to be involved in the decisions and planning that affects their lives. They need to be at the centre and comfortable with the process and feel comfortable asking questions about the aspects that worry them.

Support is needed beyond 18 years.
Many young people face the transition to independence without emotional, financial or practical supports. Support beyond planning is a necessity to help young people navigate housing, education and health.

Aftercare and future planning

Even the most stable and secure care placements can come to an abrupt end when a young person in care turns 18. Hugo Madrid, Manager Residential Care, Uniting Care Burnside, spoke of the importance of future planning and the emotional, financial and practical supports young people need to transition to independence and thrive.

Future planning needs to be holistic.
To be effective, leaving care planning needs to start early, have clear goals and activate the support networks of young people. Caseworkers need support to start the conversation with young people and their carers to ensure the best future plan is developed. It must encompass all aspects of the young person’s life.
Reforming the Out Of Home Care system

The NSW Government is committed to turning around the child protection system, starting with a major investment to initiate reform. The 2016-17 Budget provides new funding of $40 million ($190 million over four years) for services and supports at the front end of the system.

The reforms are focused on preventing children and young people entering and remaining in the Out Of Home Care system. This means preservation and restoration services will be front and centre. New evidence-based intensive family preservation and restoration programs will deliver services to an estimated 1,000 additional children and their families. Half of these places will be dedicated to Aboriginal children and families.

We are also investing $6.4 million in 2016-17 to increase open adoptions. This funding will support temporary specialist caseworkers to clear the current bottleneck of open adoptions in the system as well as ongoing specialist casework to increase open adoptions.

For young people leaving care there is new funding to help secure a roof over their heads and to help them into education, training and jobs so that they can successfully transition to adult life.

1 BILLION WILL BE SPENT ON OOHC IN THE 2016-17 BUDGET

$53 MILLION TO MEET THE INCREASED DEMAND

$40 MILLION TO REFORM THE SYSTEM

1996
6,000 Children

2016
20,000+ Children

373.3%
Increase in the number of kids in care over the last 20 years
$100 million upgrade to the child protection IT system

A $100 million upgrade of the NSW child protection IT system will ensure caseworkers are able to spend more time with vulnerable children. ChildStory is an advanced IT platform that will include all the vital details of a child’s history – case plans, health records, education pathways, photos, special events – in a central location. It will allow better information sharing between relevant parties and provide better record keeping so that there is an accurate record of children’s time in care. It will also allow children, young people and their carers to have hands-on involvement in their story.

Recontracting Out Of Home Care service providers

We want to deliver the best possible outcomes for children. To do this, we are changing the contracting arrangements for delivery of Out Of Home Care in consultation with our service partners. Through this co-design process, new contracts will reward good practice such as successful restoration work and ensure the best outcomes are being achieved for young people.
Reviewing Aboriginal entries to care

The Minister has committed to having a review completed of all Aboriginal children and young people who have entered care in NSW in the last 12 months. This review, led by an independent Chair and Steering Committee, will consider the reasons for removal and focus on permanency decisions in the best interests of children and young people.

Family Finding

We are training our child protection and Out Of Home Care caseworkers in the family finding model. The purpose of family finding is to find and/or build a safe lifelong network for children who are at risk of entering care or who are already in care. Family finding builds connections, cultural care, strengthens identity and a sense of belonging. It can support placement stability, improved child wellbeing, increased restoration rates and transitions out of the child protection system.

New protocol with police

We have established a new protocol with police to help divert young people in residential care from contact with the criminal justice system over their lifetime. This protocol will help the right people intervene at the right time. Staff in residential Out Of Home Care will now have better, more therapeutic procedures for managing the challenging behaviour of young people in their care that will be closer to how parents of teenagers manage ‘acting out’ in their own home.
Support for education

TAFE scholarships for young people in care or who have left care

The NSW Government has introduced fee free scholarships for children and young people in Out Of Home Care. Children and young people aged 15-17 in care and young people 18-30 who have previously been in care can now study for free to help establish the skills they need to secure a career. The scholarship allows children and young people to choose from more than 600 different TAFE courses.

Post Care Education Support for young people to finish their HSC

The NSW Government has introduced a new support payment to foster, relative and kinship carers to help young people in Out Of Home Care complete the year 12 HSC or equivalent after they turn 18. Carers of young people completing year 12 at the time they turn 18 will have an ongoing allowance paid to them, securing the young people’s stability at this crucial stage of their life.
Addressing homelessness for Out Of Home Care leavers

Vulnerable young adults leaving Out Of Home Care will be helped into stable housing and receive education, training and jobs support under a major Budget funding boost aimed at preventing youth homelessness.

The new $10 million funding in 2016-17 ($40 million over four years) is in addition to the $55 million that will be spent each year on more than 100 specialist homelessness programs for young people through to June 2020.

Smartphone app to help young people transition to independence

An app specifically developed for care leavers provides key information, advice and links for young people to build their life skills, and access information where and when they need it. The Resolve app provides information on relevant services and supports about relationships, health, education and employment, finance, housing and accommodation and living skills.
Improved aftercare strategy

We are developing tools and resources to help caseworkers and carers better prepare young people for life as resilient, independent and confident adults. Access to aftercare support has been improved through initiatives such as the introduction of a dedicated number for care leavers (1800 994 686) and we are working with partners across the sector to explore other options for improving aftercare support.

Records backlog

We have made significant improvements for care leavers who were in care with FACS to access their personal information from FACS records. These applications are now generally processed within 30 days. Care leavers who were placed in some of the children’s homes formerly run by FACS can now receive information about themselves from surviving records from those homes. An Historic Records Project is continuing to find, and make accessible, relevant institutional records in FACS legacy records collection.

Care leavers are entitled to access, at no charge, their personal information from records about them which were made by their care agency (s.168 Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection Act) applies.

All care files about people in care in NSW are now kept in perpetuity and they become official government records seven years after a person leaves care (s.170 CYPCPA Act). To access their information, care leavers should apply directly to their care agency (e.g. Barnardos, FACS, Anglicare).