



ACT Government
Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services
Office for Children, Youth and Family Support

Summary of Responses to the Discussion Paper and Consultation Process

Maximising Potential: improving life transitions for young people in care

February 2011

In October 2010, the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support (OCYFS) initiated a project to explore ways of improving services for children and young people in the care environment and those young people transitioning from care to independent living.

A plan to consult young people in care or who have recently transitioned from care, foster and kinship carers and other stakeholders was developed. This consultation was undertaken by the development and release of the Discussion Paper *Maximising Potential: improving life transitions for young people in care*, holding forums and individual consultation with young people in care (over the age of 15 years) and young people who have already transitioned from the care environment.

Acknowledgements

The Office for Children, Youth and Family Support would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Smith Family in providing a venue for two community forums.

Background

Discussion Paper

The Discussion Paper sought to engage stakeholders in relation to a number of issues relating to services and planning for young people in the care environment who will be transitioning to independent living. The Discussion Paper provided a proposed new model of service and posed six main questions. These were:

- What service models or components of service provision will achieve the best outcomes for this group of young people?
- What support services do young people transitioning from care require in the planning preparation stage?
- What support services do young people transitioning from care require in the transition and after care phase of the model?
- Do you think the proposed model will meet the needs of this group of young people?
- Can you suggest any innovative ways to provide services for this group of young people?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Stakeholders were invited to provide written submissions to the Discussion Paper. The closing date for written submissions was 30 November 2010. Fourteen written submissions and three oral submissions were received.

A list of the stakeholders who contributed through written submission is at **Attachment A**.

Joint submissions were received from the Youth Coalition of the ACT, Child, Youth and Family Agencies ACT (CYFAACT), ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS),

All submissions were considered and the diversity of views from the submissions, forums and focus groups are set out in this paper.

Permission to openly distribute written submissions to the Discussion Paper was not sought. The sharing of written submissions is at the discretion of the organisation that provided a written

response as indicated in **Attachment A**. To obtain a copy of a written submission please contact senior management of the respondent organisation.

Forums/Focus Groups

Three forums and three focus groups were held in November and December 2010, to promote discussion on the issues affecting young people transitioning from the care environment to independent living and a proposed new model of service for this group of young people.

The forums and focus groups have included young people currently in a care setting or who have experienced a care setting, key stakeholders including foster and kinship carers and community sector providers and peak bodies. To ensure that young people were provided with the best opportunity to have their views heard and understood, external expertise in youth consultation was engaged to conduct the youth consultation process.

Submissions and Consultations

The ideas and suggestions provided, both through written and oral submissions, the forums and focus groups form the basis of this paper.

The overall feedback on the proposals made in the discussion paper was very positive and confirmed the urgent need to improve services for young people, who are transitioning to independent living and to extend support for this group of young people beyond the age of 18 years.

The evaluation of the information obtained during the consultation process on the discussion paper has identified eleven major thematic areas of feedback. They were:

- New model (suggestions for inclusion in the new model)
- Age issues (including increasing the age limit for support)
- Accommodation arrangements (including housing)
- Need for a separate specialist team of workers
- Monitoring of the new model of service
- Education/Training
- Funding of support to young people
- Inclusion of young people in all aspects of planning
- Language changes
- Support/Training for carers
- Commonwealth issues

The themes have been listed in an order that reflects volume of the number of suggestions/feedback received under each theme. The New Model theme has been broken down into seven subthemes.

New Model

Include in the Service Framework

A number of suggestions were received outlining what respondents would like included in a new Service Framework to meet the needs of young people from the care environment who have or will be transitioning to independent living.

It was suggested that the framework should outline principles relating to the young people including their participation in all aspects of planning that relates to their lives; advocacy and support for young people; services systems and models of support.

Also suggested for the preparation of the framework was that it be worded in positive terminology using plain English, and written with the assumption that young people will read the document.

A whole of government approach was considered desirable to support and provide services for this group of young people. This could be achieved as part of the framework through the development of formal coordinated arrangements across Government agencies ensuring priority of access and appropriately targeted services.

The provision of priority access to government services and government funded services was considered a strong mechanism to improve services for this group of young people. One submission proposed that the priority of access to health services should extend beyond mainstream services to include specialist services, such as dental, ocular and mental health. It was considered that these services should be provided at no cost to the young person.

Along with issues raised in this document under other thematic headings, respondents indicated that consideration in the development of the final model should include:

- Development of methods to improve engagement and communication with young people
- Comprehensive assessment to identify individual needs
- Inclusion of a holistic approach to planning and services provision
- A strong commitment for wrap around services
- Articulation of service goals for the young person at each stage of transition planning
- Provision of a suite of well coordinated support services and ensuring that these services provide a variable range of approaches that acknowledge the differences in cultural backgrounds, skills, abilities and divergent aspirations of young people
- Recognition of the complexities faced by services agencies, foster and kinship carers when supporting young people
- Planning to address gender specific issues
- Provision details on how stakeholders will interact in a realigned system

- Clearly stated mechanisms for feedback and complaint management
- Provision of brokerage funding to support young people over 18 years
- The development of strategies to ensure that young people can access and sustain employment
- Provision of intensive support for young people facing criminal matters
- An outline of the implementation process for the model including details of the support that will be provided, who will provide this support and who is ultimately responsible to ensure the young person receives transition support
- Assistance to help the NGO sector to develop a more flexible approach to working with these young people
- Inclusion of details of the local context including interactions between the service model and legislation, policy and standards
- Methods to improve the support for young people placed in foster care outside the ACT
- Provision of training to support workers and carers to assist them to prepare young people for transition to independent living

Planning

A number of the submissions and feedback from consultations placed a strong focus on the way the planning process was undertaken with the young person. It was considered that all stakeholders involved in the planning process need to ensure, at all stages of planning, that the young person has ownership of the plan. Planning needs to be undertaken at the young person's own pace and must be done in a form of 'listening to the young person' and in a gentle and non-confrontational manner. The plan needs to be developed at an individually appropriate time for each young person. All planning must be very flexible, young person focused and driven, and adaptable to respond to changing needs or aspirations.

Suggestions received on ways of improving planning processes for transitioning to independence included:

- The provision of arrangements for the young person to ensure sustained contact and involvement with any siblings remaining in care
- Provision of a leaving care kit (a best practice example provided was Queensland's "*Go Your Own Way*" *Leaving Care Kit*)
- Planning to be commenced a minimum of 3 years prior to a young person turning 18 years
- The young person to be included in all aspects of planning for their transition to independence
- Provision of plans that identify the young person's goals and barriers to achieving these goals
- Preparation of a plan to maximise the income of the young person
- Implementation of a system of Health Care Checks prior to transitioning from care
- Implementation of consistent approaches to transition planning

- All personal documentation such as a birth certificate to be provided to the young person free of charge when they transition from care
- Preparation of a career and/or training plan
- Ensuring that all young people in the care environment have qualified for a driving licence prior to transitioning
- Improving the leadership and management of the planning processes for transition to independent living

A strong focus was given by respondents to the provision of living skills development as part of the planning process. It was considered that this skills development should begin well before the transition takes place and should be continued as a support service well beyond the age of 18 years. This training needs to be provided to all young people transitioning from a care environment, and be provided in a flexible delivery mode (ie weekends and after hours). It was also suggested that living skills training should be included in the curriculum of all high schools in the ACT.

Suggestions were made that a mapping exercise of existing life skills training be undertaken, and additional programs be developed if existing programs do not meet the identified needs.

Along with living skills training it was highlighted that a focus should be placed on developing ways of improving the resilience of children and young people in the care environment. Other areas of suggested skills development for young people, as part of the preparation process for achieving a successful transition, were financial management skills and achieving and sustaining employment.

Some respondents focused on the benefits of including carers in the planning process. In relation to carers, it was also raised that care needs to be taken to ensure that that preparation for transition does not promote disrespect by the young person for their carer.

It was suggested that easily accessible counselling support and services that will assist young people to address issues of trauma/abuse need to be included as a priority.

Improve communication

Respondents considered that one aspect of the provision of service to this group of young people and their carers, that requires development and improvement in the ACT, is the communication of information.

Suggestions were made for the development of a web based leaving care kit. The kit could contain details of services available in the ACT; information on applying for Centrelink benefits; life skills information such as how to deal with landlords, pay bills, set up bank accounts, loans, rent, leasing and young people's legal rights. The website could also include links to other useful youth and information websites.

It was also suggested that a communication strategy be developed to provide relevant information to these young people using a broad range of communication mechanisms appropriately designed to connect and communicate with young people.

Building relationships and reconnecting young people with families, natural networks and culture when they transition from care

A consistent message from the submissions was the need to improve the mechanisms used for building relationships and reconnecting young people who are transitioning to independent living with their families and to assist them to establish networks in the community and strengthen their connection with their culture.

The suggestion was made that young people would benefit from the provision of family mediation sessions, and counselling support services (for the young person) as they participate in mediation. It was also suggested that practical support should be provided such as funding travel expenses for a young person who has transitioned to independent living to visit their family.

Mentoring program

A proposal was made for the implementation of a mentoring program, that has been specifically developed, to support young people with a care experience, and aimed at providing high levels of connection to and support from community mentors. A mentoring program was seen as a way of developing community support networks and links for these young people beyond government and non government service providers.

Care and Protection Services (CPS)

The consultation process highlighted issues within CPS that are thought to currently impact on planning and the support provided for young people to transition to independent living. A significant number of respondents indicated that young people felt they were not being listened to about their desires and needs, there was a lack of flexibility in some workers' approach, and some workers were not able to establish and maintain quality relationships with young people; and some felt there was an inequality of power in the relationship between young people and their caseworkers.

A number of factors were identified as impacting on the work by CPS workers with young people in the care environment. These included:

- High staff turnover and lack of consultation with young person regarding a change of worker

- Competing client age groups for individual workers (choices for workers between a defenceless baby and a 14 year old with capacity to get some of their needs met)
- High workloads impacting on workers' capacity to have time for young people to establish and maintain effective relationships and develop trust
- A lack of some workers' interest and expertise in working with young people
- The need for consistency of workers' approach to planning and service support
- Tension between CPS practice and effective consultation with young people
- Some excessively risk averse case management practices
- The quality of worker supervision and support

It was suggested that a workforce development strategy be developed to improve training for CPS workers in working with adolescents; all aspects of the transition to independence planning process; and the identification of special individual needs of young people at this stage in their lives.

Other

Other issues that were raised in submissions for consideration in the final service model included the need for improved support for young people exiting Bimberi to better connect them with available support services and to sustain employment. A suggestion of a support service that would assist exiting Bimberi residents was the provision of transport to employment opportunities.

It was considered that the application of the new model needs to have in-built flexibility to allow for young people's changing needs and goals over time. What is a priority at 16 years may be very different to the needs and aspirations of an 18 year old.

The need for early support services to address the impact of familial alcohol abuse, drug taking or violence was identified. It was considered that the impact of these issues is a barrier to young people to achieving a successful transitions to adulthood and independence.

Some concern was raised that the Discussion Paper did not include enough recognition of the harrowing journeys young people leaving care have experienced in their lives.

Age Issues

The most consistent and strongest views expressed about age, related to the pressing need for the current age that ACT Government support ceases (18 years) to be extended to 21 years, at a very minimum. The majority of respondents indicated that to achieve successful stable transitions to independent living for young people from a care environment, support should continue to the age of 25 years. This support should be tangible, targeted and individually appropriate.

There were some conflicting views on the age that planning for the transition to independence should begin. Some felt 15 years of age is too young to start transition planning and that this

may be threatening/worrying to the young person, which could lead to instability in their current care placement. A number of young people in care placements, have experienced numerous placements and disruption, and may not have the emotional maturity to handle the prospect of further change in their lives.

The majority of submissions felt that planning should begin at the age of 15 years. Any discussion of transition planning should be introduced in a very sensitive individually appropriate way.

Some expressed the view that the legislative responsibility of the ACT Government to support these young people should be extended to the age of 25 years. Some also expressed the view that the legislation should be changed to extend the age that young people are in the care of the Chief Executive of the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Service from the age of 18 to 25 years.

Some respondents consider that current funding to community service programs generally inhibits the ability of the programs to continue their relationship with these young people once they have exited the care environment at 18 years.

A strong point of view expressed supporting the extension of the age of support to 25 years was that under 25 years, young people coming from a care environment appear to have much poorer skills and knowledge in areas of financial management, household maintenance, basic living skills etc in comparison to their peers in the general public. Also this lack of skill and knowledge is compounded for these young people, as they have usually have experienced numerous care placements, fragmented education and have limited external supports in place. Some considered that moving these young people out of their existing care arrangements at 18 years replicates the abandonment they have experienced throughout their lives.

Accommodation Arrangements (including Housing)

The provision of appropriate, secure, stable and affordable accommodation arrangements was considered by many respondents as a major factor in achieving a successful transition to independent living for young people.

A consistent message from respondents was the need to improve the variety of options for accommodation arrangements available in the ACT, for this group of young people.

Suggestions were that the options for accommodation arrangements made available should include:

- Half way housing arrangements for young people exiting residential placements such as Narrabundah House and Bimberi to assist those who are not ready to live independently
- Supervised hostel type accommodation
- Semi-independent living group homes with or without support
- Single dwellings with or without support
- Establishment of a facility like Narrabundah House for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

Another consistent message was the proposed options for accommodation arrangements should include a range of supports such as the provision of living skills training; assistance to sustain their tenancy either in the public or private housing market; one to one support with completing the application process for public housing (including the provision of all required documentation); the development of policies to ensure that young people do not transition from the care environment to short-term emergency or refuge type accommodation.

Views were expressed on the need for the development of formal partnerships to ensure the provision of priority housing by Housing ACT and suggestions were made that a new priority category within Housing ACT and specialist homeless services, be created for this group of young people to acknowledge their special needs.

Suggestions were made that a rental bond loan scheme be established for young people transitioning from care environment to assist them to establish housing in the private rental market.

Some respondents expressed the view that options to support young people in a current stable care placement be explored, to allow these young people to continue to live with these families beyond the age of 18 years.

Separate Specialist Team of Workers

A common issue raised in the consultation process and submissions was the need for a designated specialised team of workers to plan and assist young people transitioning to adulthood and independence. It is suggested that this team would plan and provide individual support to young people throughout the whole of the transition to independence process.

This team of workers were considered to need highly developed specialist skills in working and communicating with young people. Especially, as these skills relate to young people in a care environment and those transitioning to independent living. There was strong support for the view that this specialist team should include youth workers.

In conjunction with the creation of a specialist service it was proposed that a workforce development strategy be prepared to improve training for Care and Protection Service (CPS) workers in all aspects of the transition to independence planning process and the special individual needs of young people at this stage in their lives.

Monitoring

Submissions included a number of suggestions relating to the need for the new service model to include various monitoring mechanisms.

A consistent message was the need for the inclusion of clearly defined benchmarks or indicators of progress to achieve identified goals, with mechanisms for regular review in all aspects of planning for young people's transition to independent living. It was considered that the young person's plan for transition to independent living should include details of the individual goals and progress to achieve these goals. It was suggested that this plan be formally recorded on the young person's care file.

There were some suggestions that transition to independence plans should have the information reviewed and monitored six monthly by an independent body such as the Public Advocate while other submissions indicated the need for an annual audit of these plans.

Monitoring of young people who have transitioned to independent living to assess outcomes and report on progress was considered to be useful.

The need for review and evaluation mechanisms to be established at both service delivery level and whole of service system level was identified. An annual review of available support service could be undertaken and any deficits in services identified and steps take to develop necessary resources to meet any unmet need.

Education/Training

Through the forums and written submissions there was considerable focus on the importance of education/training in achieving successful transitions to independent living and adulthood, and the need to improve on the current situation. A multi-faceted and partnership approach to educational success is considered a key factor in improving the outcomes for these young people.

Some suggestions of ways to support young people were:

- Provision of automatic tutoring support for young people who are transitioning from care environment when they enter tertiary education.
- Provision of scholarships or support for accommodation costs while living on campus at University
- Developing quotas of placements for young people transitioning from the care environment into TAFE and universities.

Another common theme in responses related to improving educational outcomes for this group of young people while in the care environment, before they transition to independence. Highlighted was the need for improvement in teachers' understanding of the special needs of children and young people in care. It was suggested that a review of teacher training be undertaken to ensure that teachers have extensive skills in understanding and managing the behavioural effects of child abuse and neglect.

It was also suggested that the Department of Education (DET) allocate resources to professional development opportunities for teachers, to undertake training to develop their skills in the identification of individual special needs of young people in care, and ways to address these educational needs and achieve better educational outcomes.

The majority of submissions placed a high priority on improving support to young people in the care environment to maintain engagement in education. It was suggested this could be achieved through:

- Provision of intensive support during key transition stages such as moving between primary and high school, then the college transition and into vocational training, or transitions between alternative or non mainstream educational settings
- Provision of educational tutor programs for young people in care as an essential part of their educational support plan
- Linking of transition planning to young people's Individual Learning Plans and Student Pathways prepared by DET
- Developing closer links between OCYFS and DET
- Within DET
 - develop strategies to ensure fulltime attendance and participation including time out and in school suspension options
 - development of alternative education pathways, including training and volunteering opportunities
 - develop policy positions and set targets to ensure that the percentage of young people in care completing Year 12 is equivalent to that of the general population
 - Include life-skills development as part of the mainstream high school curriculum to develop hands on practical life skills courses/training for young people
 - establish a buddy system to assist with transitions within the schooling system

Funding

A variety of issues were raised relating to funding. Some respondents expressed concern that the issue of funding for reforms in service provision to this group of young people were not included in the Discussion Paper.

Some submissions highlighted the need for provision of adequate resourcing of the proposed model and service structure to ensure long term sustainability of the model. It also identified that the proposed service model needs to include sustainable resources allocated to support assertive outreach models of support for young people who are not engaged with mainstream services.

Some submissions from service providers identified the need for consideration of the additional costs associated with the proposed model that they would experience. They were of the view that service provision could not be extended beyond the age of 18 years without additional funding being provided to the service providers. Also raised was funding provision to remunerate foster carers for their services if they continued to provide accommodation to young people beyond age of 18 years.

Suggestions were made about additional supports that should be funded for this group of young people such as course fees, costs associated with obtaining employment, and counselling services beyond 18 years.

Also highlighted in submissions was the need for additional funding for young people to establish themselves in independent living arrangements, the Commonwealth TILA allowance was not considered sufficient to fund all the basic needs such furniture, white goods and other household items. Another area identified for consideration for funding is resourcing foster and kinship carers and service agencies for the provision of educational support to young people.

Language Change

A very common theme throughout the consultation process has been the need for a change in the language and terminologies used relating to young people who are transitioning to independent living. It is considered that a lot of the language currently used has very negative impacts on young people who are living in a care environment. The change of language was considered an issue that should be addressed in a wider context in the care environment than just the planning for transitioning to independent living.

One respondent recommended that DHCS engage with out of home care providers and the community sector to develop strengths based terminology to describe young people who have been on care orders and are transitioning to independence.

It was suggested that language such as 'out of home care' sends a message to children and young people that they have no home, and that this language be replaced with terms such as 'alternative family care'. Terms such as 'leaving care' can cause a young person unnecessary anxiety and fears (which often leads to de-stabilisation of placements) by leading them to believe that at the age of 18 they will be totally on their own, without any support or contact with their current carers. It was considered that this language often undermines the carer families relationships with the young person. 'Life Planning' terminology could be seen as intimidating for the young person and give the impression that the plan is 'for life' and that long term goals need to be identified or recorded at this stage - many young people and adults have little or no idea what they want to do next month, let alone over the rest of 'their life'.

Examples of language that could be used with a more positive outcome were terms such as 'gaining independence', 'aspirational planning', 'entering adulthood' and 'pathways'. The language choice should always focus on providing a positive message to the young person and others who are involved with these young people.

Young people during the consultation process, highlighted that in a school environment, the identification of a child or young person as being in foster care was a very discriminating experience and led to the child or young person feeling labelled and singled out for different treatment from their peers. They reported that they had experienced teachers whose attitudes changed when the teachers became aware of their living arrangements and the potential short term of their enrolment in the school. They also reported very limited support mechanisms within schools to support their educational needs.

Inclusion of Young People in all aspects of planning for transition to independent living

One of the strong themes that emerged from the consultation process is the need to include young people in all aspects of the planning for their transition to independent living.

Also identified was the need to acknowledge that the young person is the expert on themselves and is best placed to make decisions about themselves and their goals. The young person should be at the centre of the planning process and fully involved in the development of any plans for their transition to independent living.

It was suggested that the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services incorporate clear guidelines for service agencies in service purchasing agreements, to ensure that

young people are involved in all decision making that relates to their lives. Also, that all staff working with young people are trained to incorporate feedback from young people in a meaningful manner when making decisions.

Submissions highlighted the need for ongoing involvement of young people, carers and providers in the development and implementation of any planning process for transitioning to independent living.

Support/Training for Carers

Some submissions raised issues around support/training for carers. These issues included:

- the need for improved support for carers during the transition stage of a young person's movement to independence
- early intervention to better support carers to address relationship difficulties that may arise in adolescence
- The need for a review of carer training programs to improve the training offered for development of living skills in the young people
- Addressing the difficulty interstate carers experience in accessing information and support

Other suggestions made for system improvements were the up-skilling of community sector workers in the case management provided to these young people, and that research be undertaken into what helps foster carers and young people form 'forever families'.

Commonwealth Issues

A number of respondents raised issues relating to the TILA allowance and HECS fees. It was suggested that the current review of TILA should consider increasing the allowance, ways of ensuring there is sufficient budget allocated to TILA (as there are reports of the TILA budgeted funds being exhausted within six months of the beginning of the financial year) and changing the application process to make it more user friendly.

It was also suggested that an option to improve the educational outcomes for this group of young people would be for if the Commonwealth Government waived HECS fees.

Another issue raised was the need for uniformly recognised accredited foster care training across different organisations and States/Territories and the difficulties foster carers experience in trying to be registered in two different States/Territories at the same time.

Stakeholders Who Responded Through a Written Submission
- Joint and/or Individual

Professor Philip Mendes

ACT Health

Marymead

Department of Justice and Community Safety

Child, Youth and Family Agencies ACT

Public Advocate of the ACT

Women's Centre for Health Matters

ACT Council of Social Services

Turnaround Referral Assessment Panel

Foster Care Association of the ACT

CREATE Foundation

Youth Coalition of the ACT

ACT Children and Young People Commissioner

Chief Minister's Department

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