

Wrap-up report card

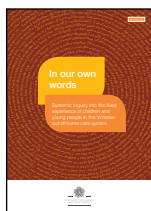
Progress against
past inquiries
– 2025



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Historical systemic inquiries in scope for this report card

Between 2019 and 2021, the Commission tabled four systemic inquiries into the child protection and out-of-home care systems in Victoria – *Lost, not forgotten*, *In our own words*, *Keep caring* and *Out of sight*.



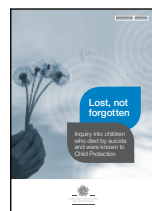
November 2019

In our own words

Systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system

In our own words drew on consultations with 204 children and young people from across Victoria who were living in, or had recently left, out-of-home care about their care system experiences. The findings highlighted:

- the strain within the child protection and care systems
- inadequate support for connection to culture, friends, family and community
- safety concerns in residential care
- the lack of involvement of children and young people in case planning and significant decisions.



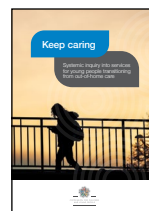
November 2019

Lost, not forgotten

Inquiry into children who died by suicide and were known to Child Protection

Lost, not forgotten considered the stories of 35 children and young people who died by suicide between 2007 and 2019 within a year of their last involvement with the Victorian Child Protection system. Their experiences illustrated wider themes, including:

- experience of family violence, neglect and other abuse, and the impact of these over time
- repeated reports from a young age, and repeated case closure early in the Child Protection process
- referrals to child and family services not resulting in effective service provision
- disengagement from school, mental ill health and behaviour challenges.



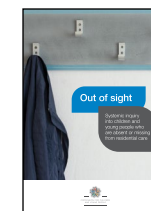
December 2020

Keep caring

Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care

Keep caring looked at the experience for young people in out-of-home care transitioning to adult life. Over 100 young people shared their leaving care experiences and over 160 Child Protection files were reviewed to determine the quality of leaving care planning and supports. In-depth reviews were completed for 30 young people who were about to or had transitioned from care. Findings included:

- the out-of-home care system is not doing enough to help young people to plan and prepare for their lives after care
- when young people leave care, they lose much of the support they relied on in care, leaving many homeless and disconnected from educational, social and mental health supports.



June 2021

Out of sight

Systemic inquiry into children and young people who are absent or missing from residential care

Out of sight explored the frequency of, reasons for, and response to children and young people being absent or missing from residential care. A review of client files and incident reports occurred alongside interviews with children and young people who were frequently reported as 'absent', workers and stakeholders. The inquiry found that:

- the need for human connection and/or safety was not being met in care, leading to children and young people going missing, and being exposed to serious harm, including sexual exploitation
- system responses to children going missing from care were unsatisfactory, highly variable and often indicative of apathy and complacency.

There have been significant achievements

Early intervention programs

Nearly \$200 million was provided in the 2024–25 State Budget to continue earlier intervention and diversion supports that aim to divert families from statutory services.

Earlier support for children in care

The 2023–24 State Budget provided \$37.8 million over four years for the Pathway to Good Health program to ensure health and disability needs are identified early.

Staff retention

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) has reviewed and implemented a revised Child Protection Operational Model that restructures the workforce and aims to improve working conditions.

Trauma-informed practice

Release of the *Framework for trauma-informed practice* for all parts of the child and family services sector in 2023.

Aboriginal children in Aboriginal care

The 2023–24 State Budget provided \$140 million to expand early intervention support for Aboriginal families and enable authorised ACCOs to take on more Child Protection functions for Aboriginal children.

Binding recognition principles

The Statement of Recognition came into effect in 2024, which included 11 binding recognition principles and the five elements of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.

Carer support

Carers have access to supports like flexible respite, the Care Support Helpdesk and Targeted Care Packages to support home-based placements like kinship and foster care.

Improved residential care

In 2023–24 \$548 million was provided to improve outcomes for children and young people in residential care. 25 two- and three-bed residential care units were introduced.

Reducing criminalisation

The 2020 release and ongoing implementation of the *Framework to reduce criminalisation of young people in residential care*, including efforts to reduce unnecessary contact with the criminal justice system.

Support for care leavers

Significant investment through the 2020–21 and 2021–22 State Budgets in the Better Futures and Home Stretch programs, allowing targeted support for young people transitioning out of care.

Efforts to reduce sexual exploitation

Funding in the 2023–24 State Budget allowing for improved intelligence gathering and sharing between police and Child Protection to tackle the sexual exploitation of young people in care. There are 22 Sexual Exploitation Practice Leads in Child Protection statewide.

But there's more to be done...

System demand

Much more work is required to drive down pressure on the Child Protection and out-of-home care systems, through greater investment and earlier intervention for children and families who need help.

Support for ACCOs

In the context of increasing numbers of Aboriginal children being removed from families, ACCOs must be appropriately funded to carry out work under the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) initiative, and appropriately supported in the transition of responsibilities.

Funding for advocacy

A child-friendly advocacy function has been legislated and established at the Commission as of 1 July 2024 but has received no government funding.

Therapeutic residential care

Despite investments, there is a long way to go. Therapeutic residential care should be available in every unit, including home-like physical environments and staff who consistently deliver trauma-informed responses.

Whole of government response to child sexual exploitation

A statewide, whole-of-government response is still critically needed to actively prevent and respond to children and young people going missing from care and being exposed to intolerable harm like sexual exploitation.

Suicide prevention

A suicide prevention strategy for children known to Child Protection has not been progressed, and practice advice regarding children in the Child Protection system who are at risk of suicide is yet to be updated.

Legislation to enshrine rights

The Commission urges reconsideration of legislative amendments to protect and ensure children's right to participate and care leavers' right to support for leaving care, including through a transition to adulthood allowance.

About this report card

The Commission for Children and Young People (the Commission) provides independent scrutiny and oversight of services for children and young people and advocates for improvements, including in the child protection and out-of-home care systems. One of the ways we do this is by undertaking inquiries into systemic issues affecting children in these systems, and monitoring government action on our recommendations made in these inquiries.

In response to the tabling of these four systemic inquiry reports, significant investment and efforts have been made to improve the child and family services system and improve outcomes for the Victorian children who rely on these systems. However, continued work and investment must be prioritised to address ongoing gaps in the child protection and out-of-home care systems so that all children and young people have the opportunity to receive care that is safe and meets their needs.

In 2025, the Commission is using a wrap-up report card to make a final assessment of progress against recommendations from these inquiries, after four years of recommendation-by-recommendation progress monitoring and reporting. The Commission intends that this report card approach will refocus government and public attention on the progress made in response to our inquiries, as well as the persistent gaps in progress and action on some key issues of concern. After this final assessment, these recommendations will be retired.

While recommendations from these inquiries are being retired after a reasonable lifespan, the Commission will continue to monitor the key issues raised by these inquiries through more recent and forthcoming inquiries.

In assessing progress made, the Commission acknowledges that the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) and other government departments make annual funding submissions for additional investment and that, ultimately, investment in these systems is subject to government decision-making. The Commission urges the Victorian Government to continue to invest in these essential systems that children and young people rely on to ensure their safety and wellbeing. The Commission will continue to advocate for improved responses to children and young people experiencing vulnerability.

This report card considers relevant progress from all four inquiries within the following themes:

- 1. Transforming and resourcing the child and family services system**
- 2. Supporting connection to culture**
- 3. Involving children and young people in decisions that impact them**
- 4. Improving connections to family, friends and community**
- 5. Ensuring therapeutic responses in residential care**
- 6. Pathways to a stable home**
- 7. Improved data collection for system oversight and improvement**
- 8. Supporting children and young people with disability**
- 9. Helping children and young people heal from trauma.**

Transforming and resourcing the child and family system

What we said and why

At the time of *In our own words*, the pressures on the out-of-home care system were well known and had been documented in previous inquiries and recognised in the Victorian Government's *Roadmap for Reform* strategy. This inquiry allowed for the voices of children and young people to share first-hand their experiences of feeling lost in an overstretched and chaotic care system, with some commenting on the irony that a system that removed them from their family to keep them safe continued to harm them. The inquiry found that despite numerous positive efforts aimed at reducing pressure on carers and the workforce, increasing strain on the system and chronic under-resourcing of those working with and caring for children was significantly limiting its capacity to address the fundamental needs of children and young people in care.

In this context, the Commission recommended that the government develop, resource and implement an integrated, whole-of-system investment model and strategy for the child and family system. The Commission posed that the model should identify resourcing levels needed for a safe and quality out-of-home care system and that the strategy should focus on the provision of effective services in line with demand, while also investing in strategies to reduce the number of children entering the system.

This recommendation was made in *In our own words*, but became a foundational recommendation referenced in the other inquiries:

- *Lost, not forgotten* included a related recommendation that raised the need for the investment model to focus on earlier intervention to reduce long-term harm to children, to meet the needs of children who need to live away from the family home, and to prioritise the most vulnerable cohorts including families with chronic and complex issues and children exposed to cumulative harm.
- In *Keep caring*, the Commission recommended a model of care that embeds a young person's life aspirations, talents and goals into their case management and include planning for their future, alongside the implementation of recommendations from *In our own words*.
- In *Out of sight* this new model of care was also referenced in the context of recommended reforms to residential care to actively prevent children and young people going missing from care, and to address safety and exploitation issues.

Transforming and resourcing the child and family system

Government achievements and progress

The Commission acknowledges that DFFH has made concerted efforts to design and seek funding for a system that benefits Victorian children and their families experiencing vulnerability. This has led to significant investment in successive budgets, including:

- Funding to commence development of a child and family system demand provisioning model through the 2021–22 State Budget. DFFH subsequently reported that it had developed a demand forecast model to predict drivers of demand. The demand forecast model informs the investment strategy, including the annual budget cycle.
- Funding to improve the capacity and quality of out-of-home care placements, which has allowed for increased therapeutic residential care options including 25 two- and three-bed residential care units (\$388.4 million in 2021–22 for existing and new placements; \$548 million in 2023–24 to improve outcomes for children and young people in residential care; \$38 million in 2024–25 to continue supports for children in care and their carers).
- \$167.4 million over two years in the 2025–26 State Budget to continue earlier interventions to keep families together and safe. This includes delivery of evidence-based therapeutic supports through Restoring Families,

support for families with cumulative and escalating needs through Strengthening Families and parenting and community support through Connecting Families-Early Help Families Services. This builds on the \$198 million provided over two years through the 2024–25 State Budget for earlier intervention, diversion and family reunification services.

- Targeted investment to strengthen Aboriginal-led supports for Aboriginal children and families (\$11.6 million in 2021–22 to establish Aboriginal-led teams at two sites to respond to Child Protection reports; \$140 million in 2023–24 to grow the Aboriginal-led service system; \$49.47 million in 2024–25 for early intervention supports for Aboriginal children and families; \$24.9 million in 2025–26 to expand the Community Protecting Boorais program, and support the Aboriginal Children's Forum and the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance).
- DFFH has also clearly articulated to the Commission its strategic approach to investment, which is focused on earlier intervention and Aboriginal-led services, reducing demand for statutory services, and the safety and quality of out-of-home care.

What remains to be done

Despite significant investment through successive state budgets, the Commission continues to see through its monitoring and inquiries a system under significant stress, where children too often remain in family situations that harm them, or continue to experience harm when in out-of-home care.

- There is an ongoing need for the child and family services system to be able to meet demand while ensuring service effectiveness. This requires sustained investment to meet existing demand and active efforts to reduce future demand by intervening earlier.
- There are some specific areas of the proposed model and investment strategy that require continuing work and further investment by government, including:
 - keeping sibling groups together
 - increased carer supports to maintain placements
 - reducing the rate of entry into care
 - preparing young people for life after care
 - making residential care safer and preventing young people from being exploited by providing more therapeutic supports.

Supporting connection to culture

What we said and why

Family is a child's first, and often strongest, connection to culture. For Aboriginal children and young people – especially those in care – strengthening connection to culture represents an important means of redressing past and present interventions that have undermined their right to culture and disrupted family and community bonds. It is also a protective factor in the lives of Aboriginal children and young people. The trauma of removal can have a lasting and intergenerational impact on a young person's life, especially when they are removed from culture and community.

In our own words made recommendations about supporting connection to culture and driving self-determination by investing in community-led services and the gradual transfer of responsibility for the case management and planning for Aboriginal children and young people in care to ACCOs.

Keep caring called for strengthened planning to support connection to culture and community as Aboriginal young people exit out-of-home care, and improved access to culturally safe leaving-care support.

Out of sight recommended better support for connection to culture for children and young people in residential care to prevent the harm caused by going missing from care.

Government achievements and progress

Most significantly, the Victorian Government has made progress against its commitment to transition all Aboriginal children to Aboriginal care, with more ACCOs taking on authorisation under the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (CYFA) for different phases of child protection intervention. The Commission recognises this as a positive step towards culturally appropriate care and self-determination and acknowledges other efforts to ensure the support provided to Aboriginal children across the child protection and out-of-home care systems is culturally appropriate. These include:

- The *Children and Health Legislation Amendment (Statement of Recognition, Aboriginal Self-Determination and Other Matters) Act 2023* introduced 11 binding principles in the CYFA for decision-makers involved with Aboriginal children and their families in the child protection system. It also strengthened the legislative provisions for the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle by expressly legislating all five elements.
- The amendments introduced by the Act also supported the effective functioning of the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) program, including broadening the scope of the program to engage earlier in the child protection system. This has enabled the Community Protecting Boorais pilot to commence where ACCOs

undertake the investigations and understand story for some Aboriginal children in the Loddon and North Metropolitan areas. Direct investment has also followed, with \$140 million in the 2023–24 State Budget to expand ACAC to provide 1,152 Aboriginal children with access to ACCO-led case management and care by June 2027.

- Ongoing ACCO-led work occurs via the *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir Strategic Action Plan (2024–2028)* and the Aboriginal Children's Forum (ACF) to refresh the model for developing cultural plans for Aboriginal children and young people. Reporting and monitoring of cultural plans has been enhanced to enable active oversight of the progress of the cultural plan for all Aboriginal children.
- Investment has been made to implement actions arising from the Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement and Strategic Action Plan.
- Investment had also been made to ensure a culturally informed Better Futures response, including ongoing funding for 17 ACCO Community connection roles and proportional Better Futures funding based on the Aboriginal care leaver population.

What remains to be done

The Victorian Government is working towards a profound generational shift in moving care for Aboriginal children and young people into the hands of Aboriginal organisations. However, we continue to see growing rates of Aboriginal children and young people being removed from their families and significant over-representation in the child protection and out-of-home care systems. The Commission urges the government to ensure authorised ACCOs are appropriately funded for their work with Aboriginal families and the care of Aboriginal children and young people. This reform must also be accompanied by investment in broader systemic change, with a vision to prevent Aboriginal children and young people from experiencing the trauma of removal in its first instance.

- The Commission continues to await evidence of local accountability measures and strategies to ensure legislation and policy improvements translate into consistent, high-quality and impactful practice, including through cultural planning.
- The Commission looks forward to the refresh of the cultural plan model, which is being led by the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA) in collaboration with other ACCOs and overseen by the ACF.

- The Commission also looks forward to hearing more about the monitoring and evaluation approach that is being developed during 2025 to evaluate the impact of the CYFA.
- The Commission will continue to provide oversight of all children entering out-of-home care and advocate for Aboriginal community initiatives to reduce the number of children in care.
- The Commission continues to work with ACCOs who are authorised under section 18 of the CYFA to understand our oversight and monitoring role for Aboriginal children and young people in their care.

Involving children and young people in decisions that impact them

What we said and why

As part of the *In our own words* inquiry, many young people told us they were given little or no warning about decisions that had been made about them without their involvement. Such examples include placement and educational changes. The Commission made several recommendations to improve processes to involve young people in the decisions impacting them, including by updating guidance, training and tools to support practitioners' direct engagement with children and young people, and establishing a child-friendly complaints function.

The Commission also noted and made recommendations about the unsustainable workload of Child Protection workers and the high rate of turnover in the Child Protection workforce, which contributes to children and young people not being able to build a relationship with a key person who they trust and who knows them well – this only exacerbated their feeling of being removed from decisions being made about and without them. One of the strongest themes from the 200+ children and young people consulted for this inquiry was that they need a single, stable worker to help them through their time in care.

Out of sight called specifically for children and young people to be offered the opportunity to speak to an independent person after being missing from care. *Keep caring* advocated for the development of youth-friendly tools and guidelines to allow young people to meaningfully participate in leaving care planning.

Government achievements and progress

- The Child Protection operating model was reviewed in 2024, resulting in a refreshed workforce structure that aims to improve staff supervision, case allocation, staff retention and case planning.
- There has been significant investment in recruitment initiatives (including the Child Protection Employment Program, 'Go Where You're Needed' and 'Switch to Social Work' campaigns) to improve the vacancy rate.
- Guidance and tools have been updated to support better engagement with children and young people, including through SAFER Framework guidance, *Child Protection Manual* updates and My Views tools to guide practitioners seeking direct input from children and young people.
- A child-friendly advocacy function has been legislated and established at the Commission as of 1 July 2024.
- Youth-friendly Better Futures resources to support care leavers have been completed.
- Young Voices resources have been developed to promote the involvement of children and young people in service policy, design and implementation.

Involving children and young people in decisions that impact them

What remains to be done

Notwithstanding the department's assertion that all children involved with Child Protection are provided with contact information for a Child Protection worker, and that team managers monitor caseloads and make allocation decisions based on risk and team capacity, the Commission maintains its view that unallocation rates and practitioner caseloads continue to make the provision of a key contact person within Child Protection difficult. Children in care need more than contact details – they need a key worker who will actively engage with them and seek their views, and who they can learn to trust. Further efforts and investment are required to address these issues and to ensure children and young people are consistently given opportunities to have a say in decisions that affect them.

- It will be essential to monitor the impact of the revised Child Protection operating model in addressing unallocation rates and practitioner caseloads. Earlier intervention is also required to reduce downstream pressure on the child protection and out-of-home care systems.
- Work to facilitate the participation of children and young people in key contexts is still lagging. For example, guideline updates to require young people to be informed about placement changes is yet to occur.

- The Commission's advocacy function has not been funded. This has meant our capacity to promote and perform this function has been limited.
- Despite improvements in tools and guidance, we still see the impact of poor engagement with children and young people. The Commission urges reconsideration of legislative amendments to protect and ensure children's right to participate.

Improving connections to family, friends and community

What we said and why

In our own words and *Out of sight* identified that children and young people's connections to family, friends and community are disrupted through placement in out-of-home care. This is often exacerbated by many placement changes and geographical moves.

The Commission made recommendations to help restore and maintain important connections, including by facilitating siblings being placed together, making it easier for carers to be able to support children to be involved in activities in their community and ensuring adequate funding for this, and measures to support children to form and maintain safe, appropriate and positive friendships.

The Commission also identified the need to support young people to repair family connections before they leave out-of-home care through *Keep caring* and recommended that the Victorian Government invest accordingly.

Government achievements and progress

- Guidance has been updated:
 - in the *Child Protection Manual* to prioritise the need for siblings to live together and to adhere to the elements of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle
 - via SAFER and the *Child Protection Manual*, requiring that when promoting children's permanency, attention must be given to preserving and promoting children's relationships with primary carers, siblings, significant adults in their lives, and friends.
- There has been significant investment in Home Stretch and Better Futures, including funding that young people can use flexibly to help repair connections with family before and after leaving care.
- Recent investment in free public transport for children and young people under 18 years, the increase in the annual funding for camps, sports and excursions and the increase in the number of Get Active Kids vouchers provide additional financial support to enable children and young people in care to participate in activities at school and after school.

What remains to be done

Children and young people in care have the same rights as other children to pursue their interests and participate in activities in their community, yet some barriers to participation have not been removed.

- While the Commission welcomes recent government investments to support more children and young people to be able to participate in activities, specific funding for children in care to participate in activities has not increased. It will be vitally important to monitor the extent to which broader investments are benefiting – and meeting the needs of – children in care.
- Further work is needed to streamline authorisation processes to make it easier for children and young people in residential and kinship care settings to participate in activities in their community.

Ensuring therapeutic responses in residential care

What we said and why

In our own words found that residential care was often unsafe for children and young people. Children and young people who spoke to the Commission said that they were often heavily impacted by the behaviour of other children and young people in their units. For example, safety and wellbeing was compromised by children and young people with serious behavioural and/or mental ill-health being placed together in non-therapeutic residential care units, and younger children being placed with adolescents and being exposed to drug use, violence and criminal offending. Placing children and young people with contrasting, complex needs in the one residential care unit and the use of four-bed units was found to contribute to the criminalisation of children in care and increased likelihood of further traumatisation.

Out of sight found that children in residential care experienced stigmatisation and were blamed for leaving their residential units. They were frequently sexually exploited and criminalised, with not enough being done to prevent these harms, either by making residential care units safe and welcoming places or by disrupting or prosecuting those who are responsible for these harms.

Recommendations from both inquiries sought to directly address these issues through cultural change, improved collaboration, updated policies, guidance and training,

and the provision of appropriate supports and interventions to ensure residential care offers a more therapeutic living environment for the children and young people relying on this model of care.

Ensuring therapeutic responses in residential care

Government achievements and progress

- Residential care building design has been informed by research and consultations with young people, including those with lived experience of residential care.
- Funding has allowed for the creation of two- and three-bed therapeutic residential care homes, and for a roving staff member (or 'rover') in these units who can help return children to placement.
- From 1 July 2025, all residential care homes in Victoria are now funded to deliver a therapeutic model of care and provide children and young people with access to therapeutic supports.
- The *Framework to reduce criminalisation of young people in residential care* has been published, with ongoing implementation supported by an action plan, a Statewide Implementation Group (including representation from DFFH, Victoria Police, VACCA, the Commission and others) and an eLearning module.
- The *Framework for trauma-informed practice* for the child and family services sector, including family violence services, was published and disseminated in February 2023.
- Staff training and the *Child Protection Manual* were updated to remove the word 'absconding' when children and young people go missing.
- There has been progress in efforts to tackle child sexual exploitation, including:
 - collaboration between DFFH and Victoria Police, including improved intelligence gathering and information sharing practices
 - funding to increase the number of Sexual Exploitation Practice Leads in Child Protection from 11 to 22 statewide
 - some progress made to work with young people in residential care places to address their risk of sexual exploitation through programs such as Power to Kids
 - sexual exploitation practice forums led by DFFH and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

Ensuring therapeutic responses in residential care

What remains to be done

While significant efforts have been made to improve the safety and effectiveness of residential care, the Commission observes the continuation of many of the issues identified in *Out of sight* and *In our own words*, including alarming levels of sexual exploitation of children and young people in care. Further work and greater government investment are required to:

- ensure the therapeutic residential care model is being consistently implemented as intended and accelerate the improvement of physical environments in all residential care settings
- deliver recommended policy and practice changes, and associated updates to guidance documents (including residential care program requirements, placement planning guidance, home-based care requirements and the *Child Protection Manual*) in relation to:
 - not placing younger children with older children
 - language used and reducing stigma
 - access to companion animals
 - support to transition into and out of residential care placements
 - streamlined processes for when children and young people go missing from care and conducting effective return to care conversations
- ensure residential care staff are consistently performing their role at the expected standards in relation to trauma-informed care, noting the Commission's ongoing visibility of incidents in residential care that suggest a lack of consistency in this area
- effectively disrupt the sexual exploitation of children and young people in care, including through a statewide, cross-agency commitment and response
- develop a cross-agency risk assessment framework for use by Child Protection, Victoria Police and care providers to guide responses to children and young people who are absent from placement
- replace the term 'warrant' in section 598 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (CYFA) with an alternative term that is not associated with the criminal justice process
- continue to implement policy changes that are designed to systematically reduce the reliance on police to return children to placement.

Pathways to a stable home and future

What we said and why

In our own words noted that for many children and young people, the harm they had experienced at home was exacerbated in out-of-home care due to multiple placement changes following placement breakdown, with residential care often being considered the last resort. The Commission recommended changes to better support placements, avoid placement breakdown and ensure some consistency in children's lives and relationships.

Keep caring also identified a lack of coordinated and considered leaving care planning for children and young people in the out-of-home care system and a dire shortage of post-care accommodation (especially for young people with a disability or with complex needs). In response, the Commission called for the Victorian Government to commit greater investment in post-care housing options and transition support, and to legislate for young people aged between 16–18 who leave care to receive support to transition to independence.

Government achievements and progress

- There has been investment in programs (including the Family Preservation and Reunification Response and Putting Families First) to support children and young people to live with their families.
- The Care Hub was introduced, providing new entrants into care with early assessments and supports including therapeutic, mental health and alcohol and other drug (AOD) supports to support family reunification or permanency.
- The range of foster care placement options has improved, including therapeutic (The Circle Program) and professional (Treatment Foster Care Oregon) options for children and young people with more complex needs and behaviours.
- A commitment has been made to an additional 200 therapeutic foster care placements from 1 July 2025.
- There is increased support for home-based care arrangements, including:
 - additional supports for kinship carers, including increased access to flexible respite support based on their unique needs and circumstances, and support via the Care Support Helpdesk
 - training on understanding trauma for kinship, foster and permanent carers via Carer Kafe
 - more Targeted Care Packages to provide flexible funding and other supports to children and young people in home-based placements who have higher needs, to prevent entry into residential care or to facilitate exit from residential care.
- There is improved support in the transition from out-of-home care to independent living, including:
 - significant investment in Better Futures and Home Stretch is helping to strengthen support for young people leaving care
 - Home Stretch has been extended to allow care placements to continue to age 21, allowing for a more gradual and supported transition to adulthood
 - there has been investment in post-care housing options, including \$32.5 million over four years in the 2023–24 State Budget for the Housing First for Young People Leaving Residential Care initiative, providing guaranteed housing for at least two years, along with case work support and assertive outreach for 225 young people.

Pathways to a stable home and future

What remains to be done

Having been removed from their own parents, children and young people in care need and have a right to a care arrangement that is safe, trauma-informed and offers them stability. Yet the Commission's reviews of out-of-home care incidents make it clear that many do not receive the tailored or trauma-informed care that they need.

- The final Better Futures evaluation is yet to conclude but once finalised, will need to be used to inform future developments to the Better Futures model.
- The *Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Child Protection) Bill 2021* – which would have established a legal obligation that the Secretary of DFFH make available a transition to adulthood allowance to all eligible young people leaving care – lapsed at the conclusion of the 59th Parliament in 2022. The Commission urges the government to re-introduce these important amendments for the protection of young care leavers.

Improved data collection for system oversight and improvement

What we said and why

In all four inquiries, the Commission highlighted the lack of adequate data collection to enable outcomes for children and young people to be tracked so that decisions on policy changes and proposed improvements are evidence-based and well-targeted.

In our own words recommended a range of measures on the experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care be tracked, including data collection on placement changes, contact with siblings and contact with workers.

Lost, not forgotten recommended investment in the Child Link Register and that a standard dataset be introduced for Child FIRST/The Orange Door and Integrated Family Services to monitor and report on the timeliness and effectiveness of their engagement with children and families, as well as rates of re-reports and re-referrals.

Out of sight recommended that information be collected about the rates of absences from residential care and the harms to young people as a result of those absences, as well as a range of improvements in the quality of data captured in relation to secure welfare, return to care conversations, and child-specific information for those who go missing or who are at risk of going missing.

Keep caring recommended that transition planning for care leavers be made more accessible to staff working with the young person, that compliance with transition planning requirements and the quality of transition planning be monitored, and that outcomes for care leavers be tracked and reported on.

Improved data collection for system oversight and improvement

Government achievements and progress

- Efforts have been made to improve data and monitoring related to children in out-of-home care, including:
 - performance measures regarding children in out-of-home care are routinely reported to and reviewed by several governance bodies within DFFH
 - a kinship assessment interactive data tool has been launched, which facilitates monthly reporting on the compliance and timeliness of kinship assessments
 - complaints/feedback data is available by age and care type
 - key data on children and young people who are absent or missing from residential care, including harm suffered by young people, is being collected and monitored
 - a new care services tool that captures drivers and characteristics of placement breakdown is expected to be completed in late 2025.
- Work to improve the tracking and monitoring of practice and outcomes associated with care leavers has included:
 - improvements to Client Relationship Information System (CRIS), including workspace and case overview pages that provide staff with clear leaving care planning processes and case recording
 - the leaving care planning monitoring tool (an internal DFFH tool) has been enhanced to provide greater oversight capability regarding leaving care activity
 - DFFH has rolled out the Better Futures Outcomes Tracking System tool across Better Futures funded providers in late 2023, allowing for improved monitoring.
- There has been some progress on development of a data report on family services and family violence services, with data from The Orange Door now accessible and a commitment to incorporating this into the report.
- Child Link has been rolled out, allowing authorised professionals (such as Child Protection practitioners, maternal and child health nurses and teachers) who have responsibility for child wellbeing and safety to access important information about a child via a digital tool.
- A review of the Client Incident Management System (CIMS) was completed, leading to the release of revised CIMS policies and guidance in December 2024, and visibility of CIMS incident reports in CRIS has been improved.
- Monitoring and reporting on the operation of secure care services to operational executives within DFFH has been strengthened.

Improved data collection for system oversight and improvement

What remains to be done

While there has been significant improvement in the information collected by DFFH about children and young people and some indication that this information is being used to make service improvements, further work would be beneficial, including:

- a standardised data set across Child Protection, The Orange Door and Integrated Family Services that tracks the effectiveness of referrals, as well as rates of unsuccessful engagement and re-reports and re-referrals
- public reporting on compliance with leaving care policy and guidance, and monitoring of the extent to which the out-of-home care system is meeting requirements to cooperate with the National Disability Insurance Agency regarding young people with a disability who are transitioning from care
- updates to practice advice, procedures and tools (including the 'repeated missing' template) to support key information about a child who goes missing to be easily gathered and shared
- tracking where care leavers go at the point of leaving care and public reporting on the life outcomes of care leavers
- across all themes in this report card, further evaluation and monitoring will be required to measure the

effectiveness of actions designed to support children and young people in the child protection and out-of-home care systems.

Supporting children living with complex needs and/or disability

What we said and why

Children living with complex needs and/or disability often need additional practical and therapeutic supports, and advanced skills from their carers in managing sometimes challenging behaviours. In practice, this can make it even more difficult than usual to achieve suitable and stable care arrangements.

In our own words and *Keep caring* highlighted the systemic gaps in assisting children and young people living with complex needs and/or disability, and the additional challenges arising from the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in the context of out-of-home care settings.

In our own words recommended that DFFH review the way contact with family is supported for children and young people in care living with a disability, while *Keep caring* made several recommendations relating to identifying and responding to needs earlier and improving support for young people with complex needs and/or disability who are transitioning out of care.

Government achievements and progress

- There is an ongoing disability practice advisor workforce in place in each of the four Child Protection divisions, with further time-limited roles having been funded since 2022–23. Time-limited funding is currently in place until 30 June 2026.
- In consultation with principal disability practice advisors, the department has drafted changes to the *Child Protection Manual* to include detailed advice about contact between children living with a disability in out-of-home care and their parents, with a view to promoting meaningful and safe interactions (to be published in September 2025).
- The 2023–24 State Budget included \$37.8 million over four years for the Pathway to Good Health program, providing 5,000 children with initial health screening and approximately 850 children who are entering or re-entering care with comprehensive health assessment, that will be used by practitioners to support access to relevant health and disability supports.
- There has been investment in disability training and guidance for Better Futures workers so that they can support young people to access the services they need as they transition from care.
- The department has advocated for the Commonwealth to improve accommodation offerings for young people with disability and to ensure seamless funding supports.

Supporting children living with complex needs and/or disability

What remains to be done

Children and young people living with complex needs and/or disability are often at increased risk of harm, and further work is required to ensure that practice is supporting the needs of this cohort to be met and the risk of harm to be reduced.

- Practice advice is yet to be updated to require case managers to consult regularly with disability experts in the years leading up to the young person's transition from care. However, the Commission notes further government investment would be needed to require consultation with disability practice advisors at specific points of Child Protection involvement, as this would lead to demand beyond the current capacity of the roles.
- There is insufficient evidence that the department is monitoring how well the out-of-home care system is liaising with the NDIS about young people transitioning from care.

Helping children and young people to heal from trauma

What we said and why

Lost, not forgotten identified that children who are known to have experienced childhood abuse and trauma are likely to require help to recover from their experiences. However, this was not identified as a focus of Child Protection or mental health interventions for the children reviewed, and there was a need for improved practice around identifying and responding to suicide risk.

For children in out-of-home care, the impacts of trauma both before they enter care and, in too many cases, because of their time in care, are long-lasting and significant. *Keep caring* identified a high incidence of trauma among care leavers, along with associated issues such as mental ill-health, substance use and complex behaviours. Part of ensuring young people leaving care have the best possible chance at a good life requires access to the services they may need to address trauma, poor mental health and substance use.

Government achievements and progress

- The *Victorian suicide prevention and response strategy 2024–34* was released in response to Recommendation 26 from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.
- Flexible brokerage is currently available via the Better Futures and Home Stretch programs to support young people transitioning from care who require timely access to services to respond to their ongoing and unmet mental health and substance use needs.
- As noted under other themes, some updates to training and practice guidance have been made to improve workforce understanding of trauma, including via the new Child Protection Practice Induction Program, a seven-hour Suicide-Supporting Clients at Risk program on the department learning management system, and the *Framework for trauma-informed practice*.

Helping children and young people to heal from trauma

What remains to be done

Suicide is the leading category of death for children aged 13 and over who are the subject of the Commission's child death inquiries. Since *Lost, not forgotten* was tabled in November 2019, the Commission has been notified of 29 suicides of children and young people known to Child Protection in the last 12 months of their lives. There has been a concerning lack of progress to consider the suicide risk of children and young people known to Child Protection:

- a suicide prevention strategy for children known to Child Protection has not been progressed, although the Commission notes that initiative 5.4 under the First Implementation Plan 2024–2026 relates to scoping the development of a suicide prevention and response action plan for children known to Child Protection. The Commission urges renewed focus on suicide prevention for children known to Child Protection
- progress has been extremely slow in relation to updating practice advice regarding children in the Child Protection system who are at risk of suicide. While an internal review of practice advice had commenced in 2022, alongside a system mapping project with the Department of Health, further action has been paused until after Action 5.4 from the *Victorian suicide prevention and response strategy 2024–34*'s first implementation plan has been completed.

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