

Submission to Inform the Review and Redesign of Post-Care Services in SA

CREATE understands that the South Australian government is in the process of reviewing services and supports available for young people who have transitioned from the care system. To assist this process, CREATE wishes to draw the review panels' attention to its recent report "*Transitioning to Adulthood from Out-of-Home Care: Independence or Interdependence?*" (McDowall, 2020), that documents the results of interviews with 325 young care leavers from throughout Australia. This report covers all aspects of the post-care experience, and highlights areas where improvements in policy and practice need to be implemented.

For the purposes of this submission, four areas have been identified as deserving particular attention:

1. More customised support for leaving care (housing, mental health, life skills);
2. Support locating and accessing services;
3. Extended care to 21;
4. Continued mentoring support.

These will be briefly discussed in terms of findings from CREATE's post-care report and relevant consultations conducted with young people in care in South Australia.

1. More Customised Support for Leaving Care (Housing, Mental Health, Life Skills)

In CREATE's recent post-care report (McDowall, 2020), when young people were asked initially what one or two areas that they felt should be addressed to improve the experience of those living in care, most (29% of respondents) mentioned needing more support for becoming independent. This compared with 19% who had caseworker issues, and 15% who thought carers could be better prepared for their supportive role. Placement stability, involvement in decision-making, and mental health concerns also were mentioned. Comments from young people highlighted the range of issues that need to be considered by governments. For example:

More care support until you are 25 years; this includes more help with housing, job security, [and] support with family connections. There are so many problems in the OOHC system. (Female, 22 years)


More focus on mental health; education on life after care; planning short term/long term future goals that are more executable; accessing all necessary support services; [and] connecting with family members. (Male, 24 years)

Recruitment process of caseworkers and carers; need people who do it for the right reasons and do it for empathy. Often your experience will come down to the worker you get. (Female, 22 years)

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“The overwhelming feeling expressed in 40% of the 453 responses [on leaving care] was loss of support from caseworkers, carers, and, in many cases, their social networks of friends” (McDowall, 2020, p. 38).

2. Support Locating and Accessing Services

One of the most disturbing findings regarding post-care support was the fact that so few young people accessed the supports that are available to assist them become independent. Housing services were the ones most frequently sought (by 26% of respondents). All other services attracted fewer than 20% of eligible young people. Indeed, only 20% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people sought specific support from Indigenous agencies. It is important for governments not only to ensure that necessary services are provided for those striving for independence, but also to establish mechanisms to facilitate access to those services. When rating their satisfaction with the support they had received when leaving care, young people from South Australia gave a mean score of 30 out of 100, indicating that more could have been done to provide the assistance they needed to become functioning members of the community (McDowall, 2020, Figure 3.14).

CREATE’s Post-Care report also highlighted that young people would often reach out to case workers and carers after leaving care and often didn’t know the services that were available to them. Young people in South Australia tell us that they are seeking those relationships for stability, so they do not have to repeat their story again and again when developing yet another supportive relationship. Young people go to who they know at the time that they need help.


Comments from young people suggested that one change that could be implemented was encouraging carers and caseworkers to be more proactive in helping those aging out of care find necessary support:

Communication with the young people is really important, it is their life so allow them to be more involved. The caseworkers and carers should be actively seeking out their involvement. Workers should be bringing up conversations with children and young people about their goals and dreams [and] talking to them about how they can achieve it, at the same time letting the young person know it’s not the end of the world if they don’t reach all their goals in five years. (Female, 24 years)

3. Extended Care to 21

A movement currently gaining acceptance throughout Australia is to follow the US and UK precedent and provide placement support for young people in care until they turn 21 years. South Australia was one of the first states to introduce a model providing financial support for carers to continue providing a placement for the young people in their care. CREATE’s post-care report shows that this preference is popular, with 51% of those in care remaining with carers after turning 18 years. Clearly, a large number of carers would benefit from some financial recompense for providing this additional support and would then more likely be in a position to meet more of a young person’s needs. However, equally important is the possibility that, with some financial support, more carers would be able to allow young people to remain and be supported in their final placement.

To date, five jurisdictions have committed to providing some level of support until 21, but the models chosen are variable in the assistance provided. Victoria recently has provided support for all care leavers irrespective of placement type (foster care, kinship care, permanent care, or residential care). In the VIC model, support is provided directly to the young people, so that they are in control of choosing where they



feel is the best place for them to live as independent citizens. In this SA review of post-care services, the VIC approach would be a “best-practice” model to interrogate and possibly emulate so that the highest level of assistance can be provided for SA young people.

Themes from Youth Advisory Groups and the South Australian specific consultation “*Extending placement support: Perspectives of young people with an out-of-home care experience*” have confirmed that young people (most of whom were still in care), felt relatively confident that they had the skills to live independently, but would benefit from having the buffer of an extra three years of support while they establish themselves, particularly regarding education and employment. Young people were positive about the idea of having a safety net, so that if challenges arose after moving out of home, they would have the option of returning to a caring place (CREATE Foundation, 2019).

4. Continued Mentoring Support

One suggestion for improving the post-care experience was made by many young people throughout CREATE’s report. They identified many life skills that they needed help with, from housekeeping and enrolling in courses to paying bills and getting to appointments. Clearly, they needed continuing support that could not always be provided by a former carer or caseworker. Experience in the UK (Munro et al., 2012) and in trials in Australia at Berry Street (Purtell & Mendes, 2016) and in WA (ACIL Allen, 2020) has shown that some form of mentoring program (formal or informal) that provides continuity of practical support for young people as they attempt to become independent can be extremely beneficial. Maintenance of peer-support networks that also can provide this ongoing support is important.

Conclusion

While post-care services are being reviewed and re-designed, CREATE recommends serious consideration be given to enhancing systems already in place to provide stability and support for young people until the age of 21, by refining the operational model already implemented and ensuring it is adequately funded. Other practical recommendations include:

- Establishing flexible arrangements so that the young people can connect with a supportive person within an agency, while in care, who can become their post-care contact. This mentoring support would assist in providing young people with other people in their lives to widen their support network, which could be particularly important in regional areas where face-to-face support is extremely limited in the post-care space as it currently stands;
- Establishing systems by which contact can be maintained with young people when independent so that they can check in and be informed of services that are available that they might need.

As has been demonstrated many times (e.g., Deloitte Access Economics, 2018), investment in support early in the life course can provide enormous benefit (both socially and financially) for the young people involved, but also for the community of which they are a part. It is hoped that the content in CREATE’s report is considered, and that the suggestions summarised here will be of value.

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