



creating a better life
for children and young
people in care

Submission for the Western Australia Youth Action Plan Consultation Paper

"The kid's voice should be the main voice about what they want". (Young person, WA)
(CREATE Foundation, 2023)

*"Provide lots of help and services; come to see the kids; and build
a connection"* (Young person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2023d)

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About CREATE Foundation

CREATE Foundation is the national peak body for children and young people with an out-of-home care experience. We represent the voices of over 45,000 children and young people currently in out-of-home care (OOHC), as well as those who have transitioned from care, up to the age of 25.

Our vision is that all children and young people with a care experience reach their full potential, and to do this we:

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

We engage directly with children and young people through our connection and engagement programs and activities to hear about their experiences with the care system and learn more about the issues of importance to them. We then translate these insights into advice for Government and the sector to reform the child protection system and improve outcomes for children and young people.

Introduction


CREATE welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Western Australia's Youth Action Plan 2023–2026. Our submission focuses on how the new Plan can improve engagement and outcomes for children and young people with an out-of-home care experience.

The scope of the new Youth Action Plan, as stated in the consultation paper, is to support youth development and engagement, promote positive contributions by young people, and advocate on behalf of the needs of young people. In Western Australia there are around 5,174 children in OOHC, 29% of whom are Aboriginal (WA Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2024). It is important to acknowledge that young people in OOHC are likely to face different challenges and barriers to participation, and are at greater risk of disadvantage than their non-care experienced peers across all major life domains and pathways to adulthood. For example, young people with a care experience are less likely to graduate from high school or enrol in post-secondary education; experience greater difficulty securing employment and housing; are more likely to be involved in the justice system; and have a greater incidence of mental health and substance use problems (McDowall, 2020; Stein, 2016).

In this context, while we support the proposed priority areas in the new Youth Action Plan, we emphasise the need for young people with a care experience to be elevated as a priority group. Additional actions are needed to ensure that their views are heard and that targeted strategies are put in place to improve outcomes for this cohort.

CREATE recommends:

1. Young people with an out-of-home care experience should be included as a priority cohort under the new Youth Action Plan. Relevant data around young people with an out-of-home care experience could be inserted in the "Overview of young people in WA" section that currently includes data on other priority cohorts, to ensure better visibility of young people with a care experience throughout the development and implementation of the



Plan; the Plan should include targeted actions and strategies to improve participation and outcomes for young people with a care experience.

Through this submission, we outline our recommendations for strategies to ensure that young people with an OOHC experience are able to participate meaningfully in the development and implementation of all the initiatives under the Plan. These actions align with WA Government's commitments under *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031*.

A voice for young people

At CREATE, we have found that young people's perspectives for policy design are extremely insightful. Their views based on lived experiences can be very different from solutions designed top-down by stakeholders who may not be fully aware of what a young person needs in those circumstances, or of how a policy affects their lives in practice. This is why, including young people's voices in policies that affect them is critical, and we are pleased that this also one of the priorities for this Action Plan. CREATE acknowledges the WA Government's commitment to give young people voice through a series of initiatives such as the Ministerial Youth Advisory Council (MYAC), the Youth Ministerial Roundtable, and other youth leadership programs.

CREATE provides empowerment programs to young people in care who are interested in contributing through their voices to youth policies and advisory bodies, and we have found that their resilience, determination, passion and understanding of different institutional systems make their insights very valuable for policymakers and stakeholders. CREATE's program 'Speak Up' trains young people with a care experience to develop advocacy, leadership and public speaking skills. Young people who complete the 'Speak Up' program become CREATE Young Consultants, and they go on to effectively contribute to discussions with decision-makers, train workers and help to change the system for other children and young people in care. CREATE's Young Consultants often engage in opportunities to participate in various advisory groups, councils, ministerial consultations and conferences as advocates to highlight the needs of all children and young people in care. In Western Australia, CREATE's young consultants were involved as part of the lived experience steering group that advised on the rollout of Homestretch WA.

More opportunities should be created and provided to young people with an OOHC experience so they can actively contribute and partake in high level advocacy and consultations to inform policy development and reform that concern them. Furthermore, young people in care also need to have a say on broader matters under different departments and portfolios that also affect them, for example education, housing, health and wellbeing, youth justice, diversity, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs and other youth matters. As mentioned in the introductory section, young people in care are more likely to experience poorer outcomes across all life domains, and therefore need to have a voice on how those matters affect them.


CREATE recommends:

2. Expanding the Ministerial Youth Advisory Council to include dedicated positions for young people with a care experience to ensure that this cohort is meaningfully engaged in important reform processes and have an opportunity to influence government policy at the highest level.

Wellbeing, connection and inclusion

Removing barriers to participation in youth activities

The Youth Action Plan consultation paper states that the scope of the consultation is to improve universal services for all young people aged 10-25. Through our consultation on health and wellbeing



we have heard that young people in out-of-home care, similarly as their peers, often wish to take part in meaningful activities and establish social connections that help them grow and develop a positive sense of self, whether through education, community events, sports, arts and culture, health, and any other kind of learning opportunity for skill development, as well as better health and self-care (CREATE, 2023). Opportunities for connection to culture are also important, especially since 59% of young people in care are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background (CCYPWA, 2024). However young people in care may encounter challenges or barriers that prevent them from participating in such activities due to different factors, as we discuss in this section.

A problem often raised at our Youth Advisory Groups is how young people are unable to participate in youth activities due to the bureaucratic constraints associated with living in an institutional system. For example, they may experience difficulties in ensuring that all the correct forms are completed and submitted by their carers or in accessing particular records that are needed to participate in activities or to access services. This can be especially difficult for young people living in residential care, who may also be required to gather consent from multiple workers, and may encounter challenges and delays in communication and sharing of information between providers and the Department of Communities.

Another complication is that young people in care may go through frequent placement changes, which may result in changing schools and communities (Australian Institute of Families Studies, 2021; Clemens, 2017). Frequent placement changes can break down support systems and separate young people from adults and peers they had meaningful bonds with (CREATE, 2020). Furthermore, this often makes engagement in community activities difficult, as moving may force young people to leave activities they were previously engaged in and having to start over again elsewhere where everything and everyone is new to them. Young people told us that get settled in a new environment is difficult and affects their ability to form relationships and connect with the community:

“If you do get settled – I find that as soon as you get settled they move you somewhere else.”
(Young person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2024)


Another barrier for young people in care is experiencing stigma, bullying, discrimination, and low expectations, which can be a barrier in education, but also any other recreational activities, training, and social and cultural events. This may affect young people’s relationships and social experiences, as well as their self-esteem. In particular, data collected by the Commissioner for Children and Young People (CCYPWA) shows that over one third (36%) of Aboriginal students in remote areas have been bullied by students from their school (CCYPWA, 2022).

CREATE recommends:

3. That the Minister for Youth in collaboration with the Department of Communities develop a strategy to remove barriers and improve access to youth activities for young people in out-of-home care, which should apply to all the activities in the new Youth Action Plan. CREATE is open to conduct a state-wide consultation with young people to create a practice-guide for youth services on how to remove barriers and improve participation for young people with a care experience, including education and strategies to develop more awareness about the circumstances and needs of young people in care, education to tackle stigma, racism, and discrimination; outreach to target young people in care; and removing barriers related to bureaucracy.

Youth in regional and remote areas

It is vital that young people in regional areas have the same opportunities to be involved in services and activities as their peers in major cities. However, the experiences of young people living in regional and remote areas can be very different, whether regarding participation in activities, access to services, educational opportunities, and more (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA,



2022). In Western Australia, 15.8% of the youth population live in regional areas, and 8.8% in remote areas (CCYPWA, 2022). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people have been found to go through significant disadvantage in their primary needs including proper nutrition and accessing basic health services. Young people pointed out that they would like to see:

“Better amount of funding allocated toward programs and services that allow us young people in regional areas to connect in and find out about services like CREATE – caseworkers always seem to forget to mention CREATE to young people. Where we have all these online connection events that YP could be accessing and sharing their stories if they want to – but there is a lack of funding in regional areas.” (Young person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2024)

“They believe that there’s not enough young people leaving care in the Great Southern – support services aren’t given to funding especially for leaving care support systems.” (Young person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2024)

CREATE recommends:

4. That the upcoming Youth Action Plan includes a commitment to increasing funding and delivery of projects, services and activities in remote and regional areas. CREATE is also open to expanding our youth activities such as ‘Speak Up’ training and Connection Events in regional areas as requested by young people, with adequate support.
5. That the new Youth Action Plan includes a commitment to increasing funding for ACCOs and other local Aboriginal-led youth organisations in regional and community areas to deliver culturally appropriate youth programs and activities.


Health and wellbeing

Our recent consultation on the health and wellbeing of young people in OOHC in Western Australia have highlighted how barriers to attaining positive health care include lack of involvement in decision-making and care planning; unsuitable and unstable placements; absence of trusted relationships; disconnection from culture; and the fear of judgement/stigma (particularly around mental health) (CREATE, 2023). Therefore, the barriers outlined above also affect the way young people in OOHC access healthcare. For example, they may have difficulties accessing Medicare details, obtaining past medical history, and getting permissions (McLean et al., 2020). Changes in placements may also entail that young people will need to change health care providers, and it could have an impact on their waitlist position for health assessments and specialist treatment. Young people need to receive continuing support to access health care after the they leave the out-of-home care system. After turning 18, this group of young people frequently lack access to the guidance of parents or other adults to navigate the health care system.

CREATE recommends:

6. Including initiatives in the new Youth Action Plan that help young people in out-of-home care navigate the health care system, access relevant health information, and make informed decisions about their health needs. Young people with a care experience should be involved in designing such services, and may suggest innovative projects to support young people in care with their mental health and general wellbeing.
7. To extend the Health Navigator Pilot Program (HNPP) that was piloted in WA to help young people in care access health services is included in the new Youth Action Plan.

The HNPP helps young people in care receive the support to look after their health when they need it. The project includes materials for professionals and carers to ensure that the information is accessible and made available to all young people.



A dimension of health that requires particular attention is mental health. In CREATE's recent consultation with 25 young people in care in Western Australia (2023), mental health was the second main concern for this group, in fact, 17% of the participants reported severe episodes of anxiety and 26% experienced severe episodes of depression or bipolar disorder (CREATE, 2023). As Ungar and Theron (2020) have suggested, the estimates of care-experienced young people with mental health conditions are typically higher than those of their not-in-care peers. McDowall (2018) found that 68% of young people with an out-of-home care experience in Australia accessed counselling services; and Teska (2017) estimated that up to 80% had a mental health diagnosis.

"More access to mental health things, starting the process is hard so doesn't seem worth the efforts." (Young Person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2023b)

Mental health is also a theme that is consistently raised at our Youth Advisory Groups. In these contexts, the factors raised as impacting mental health are frequently related to the anxiety and fear of transitioning from care and becoming homeless, past-trauma, relationships with caseworkers, feeling unheard, and stigma (CREATE, 2023b). Young people who used mental health services pointed out that they were not always helpful, because they did not necessarily feel that their experiences of being in care were understood, and felt judged. Therefore, young people felt that improved education and communication for staff in mental health facilities would be helpful. Some young people, due to their trauma-experiences, found talking-based therapy approaches not helpful, but had positive experiences of art therapy, and therefore suggested that being able to access a range of different therapy options including art therapy could be helpful.

One the most talked about themes in Youth Advisory Groups is the need for mental health supports during the transition from care period. Young people shared about the anxiety they felt when transitioning from care to adulthood and feeling isolated with limited access to mental health supports.


CREATE recommends:

8. That the new Youth Action Plan includes a commitment to expanding free mental health services delivered by specialist practitioners with knowledge and understanding of OOHC. These should be culturally safe and developed in consultation with young people with lived experience.

Success! Reach your potential

CREATE is pleased to see that transitioning to adulthood included as a priority in the Plan. Sadly, a range of studies have shown that young people leaving care experience more disadvantage than their peers in the general population especially in their journey towards adulthood. They are less likely to graduate from high school or enrol in post-secondary education; they experience greater difficulty securing employment and housing; are more likely to be involved in the justice system; and have a greater incidence of mental health and substance use problems (McDowall, 2020; Stein, 2016). A study conducted by AIHW (2021) shows that 56% of young people with an OOHC experience were on income support, which is three times higher than the general population.

Young people with an OOHC experience are particularly vulnerable as they transition from care and adjust to independent living (AIHW, 2021). As a result of adverse childhood experiences and trauma, and higher levels of disability and potential limitations around support networks, young people leaving care often face compounding barriers to achieving social and economic participation. When they leave care, they often do not have a family to support them, or a place to live, and they have to figure this out on their own.



“It’s so much harder when you feel alone in any process that YP are left to deal with on their own.” (Young person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2024)

Through this Action Plan, we would like to see young people receive adequate support to avoid negative outcomes such as exiting into poverty and homelessness, but to have the opportunity to reach their potential and feel successful in life, just as their peers. CREATE has been an advocate nationally for extending support to care leavers until at least 21 years of age. CREATE welcomed the introduction of the Homestretch program in Western Australia in 2019, which includes several key elements of support, including a housing allowance or carer payments, transition coaching and support, the Invest in Me fund for extra financial needs, support circles and cultural connection support for young people from First Nation backgrounds wanting to return to country. However, more support is needed.

Young care leavers suggested that they would like to see initiatives where they can learn independent living skills, such as cooking, maintaining a house, and financial counselling. They also proposed peer mentoring programs:

“I believed we need financial counselling when we’re leaving care. What we can afford/how to manage our finance/how to handle our money. We’re left with this large sum of money where we don’t have an idea what to do with it. Left with a lot of problems on top of what we already had. We need a metro and regional mentoring program where younger teen can be paired with older care leaver. We also need to learn how to maintain our houses” (Young Person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2024)

“Life skills programs would be really helpful, especially for the older teens”. (Young Person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2024)

CREATE recommends:


9. That the new Youth Action Plan includes provisions for a service where young people can learn independent living skills, including peer mentorship and financial counselling programmes.

Housing and Cost of Living for Care Leavers

The ‘Beyond 2020 WA Youth Action Plan 2020-22’ (WA Government, 2024), dedicated attention to the need for ‘a safe place to live’ for young people, particularly in light of the rising cost of living trend. In 2023, Living Cost Indexes rose between 4.0% and 6.9% in 12 months (Australian Bureau of Statistic, 2023). Young people are disproportionately affected by the rising costs of living (Cooke, 2023), and young people leaving out-of-home care are at significant increased risk of homelessness (McDowall, 2020). CREATE hopes that housing and the costs of living will therefore again be a priority area in the new Plan.

CREATE was pleased to see how the last Youth Action Plan included housing initiatives for young people. Unfortunately, since care leavers are more likely to experience homelessness, additional targeted responses are required. While the new Youth Action Plan consultation paper seeks to support young people who may start moving out of their homes, the fact that for care leavers this is not a choice. When they can no longer stay in their placement, they must find accommodation, and without adequate support, unfortunately they frequently are unable to do so. CREATE’s research has shown that 30%, of the young people with a care experience surveyed had been homeless at some stage within their first year after leaving care (McDowall, 2020).

From responses we have gathered through our consultation and feedback during youth advisory group sessions, young people need housing options that are safe and where they are not exposed to



harm, drugs and criminal behaviour. Furthermore, depending on the level of skills or health and disability needs, young people may need to be in housing that they are able to maintain and where they are in condition to live independently, and if not, they need living arrangements where they are supported to do so. Young people have also frequently raised the need to have access to transport to get to work, education, and training, being close to their culture and support people/ community to avoid falling into unsafe cycles, and options to accommodate couple and young family requirements.

“For me transitioning from care was horrific – the paperwork was really rushed and they hadn’t organised any housing and I was left stranded.” (Young Person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2024)

“They pushed me out as soon as possible. It was a couple of weeks until I had the notification and I had to move out.” (Young Person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2023b)

“At times when in care, I was homeless for a night or two, sleeping on case worker’s couches etc. I also spent time in a day-care during the day as there was nowhere to put me.” (Young Person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2023b)

While the WA Government provides some financial support, including for housing, and other wrap around supports through Home Stretch, it is not always adequate for young people to meet their expenses and obtain safe and secure housing. Furthermore, we acknowledge that the last Youth Action Plan included a range of housing initiatives to support youth staying in rental properties, buying a house, reducing homelessness, and continued support for Foyer Oxford. Nonetheless, we still hear from young people who have shared that they have not been able to access suitable housing options upon leaving care.


CREATE recommends:

10. That housing and cost of living pressures for care leavers is elevated as a priority topic in the new Youth Action Plan and at the Ministerial YAG
11. That the new Youth Action Plan includes a commitment to increased investment in appropriate housing solutions for care leavers such as expanding Youth Foyers, and reviewing access to social housing.
12. That the new Action Plan includes a commitment to increasing financial support for care leavers of up to \$16,000 per year, in line with other jurisdictions, as part of Home Stretch WA.

Education

Education is an important part of any young person’s growth. Unlike their peers who can count on their families while completing their studies and figuring out their career paths, young people leaving care have to support themselves from a young age. Also, because of the lack of family support and the need to support themselves financially, education can make an important difference to ensure they can live successful lives away from poverty and insecurity, and it underpins young people’s chances of success later in life (Forseman, 2019; Fernandez, 2019). Thus, it is even more critical that young people in OOHC’s needs and voices are included in strategic policies and planning for education in Western Australia.

The barriers that young people in OOHC encounter result in an achievement gap, school drop-out, exclusions from school, difficulties with attendance, and other issues (Chambers & Hunter, 2016; Fernandez, 2019; Clemens et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2017). Students in OOHC have previously scored below the National Minimum Standards (NMS) by 13–39 percentage points on standardised tests such as NAPLAN (Chambers & Hunter, 2016; Fernandez, 2019; McDowall, 2018; Sebba & Luke, 2019). Of particular concern are poor levels of literacy and numeracy (Knight & Rossi, 2018; Townsend et al.,



2020), with language, prereading, and reading skills often most effected. Knight and Rossi (2018, p. 4) attribute this to delayed development, caused by “trauma, poor stress regulation, low self-esteem and self-efficacy,” not to mention the disruption caused by changing care placements and schools. Disconcertingly, one study cited by Townsend et al. (2020) showed that every time a young person changed schools (most often due to placement changes), their academic progress was delayed by four to six months. Our consultation on education for young people in OOH in Western Australia, showed that 46% of the participants aged 19 to 24 had left education (CREATE, 2021).

Young people explained that finishing school was difficult due to disruptions caused by placement mobility and lack of support.

“It can be hard for young people in care to complete year 12 and even year 10. The way that care works is that kids are kicked out of home at 18 and sometimes they're still at school and they have to drop out so that they can work to get enough money to pay for themselves.”
(Young person, WA) (CREATE Foundation, 2021)

In Western Australia, there are provisions for each child in care to have a 'Documented Plan' which outlines what the child needs for his educational, attendance, and wellbeing (Department of Communities WA, n.d.) In addition to this, more advanced measures should be implemented to ensure that young people with a care experience have the same opportunities as their peers. Care leavers also need better support to pursue tertiary education. It is estimated that only around 1% of care leavers continue to pursue further studies, though continuing studies could give them a chance to step out of poverty (McNamara et al., 2019). For example, the Raising Expectations program in Victoria facilitates a collaborative partnership with universities and other educational institutions such as TAFE to support young people with care experiences in pursuing various educational pathways. In addition to accessing more than 700 fee-waived courses from TAFE, Raising Expectations offers young people with care experiences with assistance to access funding for tertiary education in conjunction with additional supports that a young person may require from university or TAFE to better accommodate their needs in navigating their studies. Through Raising Expectations, more than 677 young people with care experiences are either enrolled in university or TAFE and 355 young people having completed their education.

CREATE recommends:

- 13.** That the WA Youth Action Plan includes a commitment from the Department of Education, in partnership with universities, to introduce targeted support programs to encourage and improve access to tertiary education for care leavers. This could involve scholarships, waived fees for TAFE and/or University courses, accommodation support, as well as enrolment support and mentorship.
- 14.** That the Youth Action Plan includes a commitment to implementing a strategy to support young people in care who are at risk of dropping out of school to ensure they can complete high school. Strategies should be developed in consultation with youth people with a care experience.




Conclusion

In summary, CREATE recommends ensuring that the voices of young people in out-of-home care are included in all the key areas of the *Action Plan*. We strongly suggest including targeted planning for this group not only in the context of policies concerning child safety, but more broadly when planning youth strategies, such as health and well-being, education, youth engagement activities, affordable housing, and access to services and resources, to remove any barriers that young people in care may encounter.

Thank you for considering our submission. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the recommendations in our submission, please contact Sarah Chew, Advocacy Manager, CREATE Foundation at sarah.chew@create.org.au.

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