



**Protecting Children:
Child Protection Outcomes Project Report
Consultation
February 2004**

This submission was authorised by Cath Smith, Chief Executive Officer,
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Protecting Children – Submission Cover Sheet

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Submissions should respond to the report ‘Protecting Children: The Child Protection Outcomes Project’ and relate to one or more of the following key consultation issues. Please indicate which issues are addressed by placing a tick in the box.

- ✓ A. A NEW MODEL FOR CHILD PROTECTION BASED UPON A UNIFYING FRAMEWORK FOR THE WELFARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN
- ✓ B. A COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP FOR THE WELFARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN
- ✓ C. A NEW MODEL FOR INTAKE, ASSESSMENT AND REFERRAL
- ✓ D. DEVELOPING A RANGE OF SERVICE RESPONSES THAT ARE APPROPRIATE FOR THE WIDE VARIETY OF CHILD PROTECTION CONCERNS, PROBLEMS AND CIRCUMSTANCES PRESENTED BY FAMILIES
- ✓ E. A FOCUS ON REDUCING OUT-OF-HOME CARE WHERE POSSIBLE, BUT ALSO ON GREATER PERMANENCY AND STABILITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE WHO ARE NOT ABLE TO RETURN TO THEIR FAMILIES

A fair and just society is one that provides adequate and appropriate care and support for all children, young people and their families.

Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS works to ensure that all Victorians have access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services, through advocating for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS members reflect a wide diversity, with members ranging from large charities, sector peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals in social policy debates.

VCOSS Vision

VCOSS believes a society that lives out the principles of equity and justice:

- Ensures everyone has access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services
- Involves all people as equals, without discrimination
- Values and encourages people's participation in decision making about their own lives and their community.

This is consistent with Article 25 (1) of the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights¹ which states:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of [her or] himself and of [her or] his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood.”

VCOSS congratulates the Government and the Minister for initiating this Review, and the Panel for its efforts in undertaking extensive consultations with a diverse range of community organisations and individuals. VCOSS urges the Minister and the whole Victorian Government to demonstrate strong leadership in implementing the reforms required across legislation, policy, governance and service delivery to improve and further promote the wellbeing of children, young people, families and the whole Victorian Community.

VCOSS has encouraged and supported its members to contribute to the *Protecting Children* report consultations and submission process, many of whom have direct experience of the current family support and child protection system, and its strengths and weaknesses. VCOSS endorses the submissions and recommendations of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare: Children's Welfare Association of Victoria (The Centre - CWAV), the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), Anglicare Victoria, Council to Homeless Persons (CHP), Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services, MacKillop Family Services, Melbourne City Mission, St Luke's Anglicare, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS), Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) and Youthlaw.

VCOSS particularly directs the Panel to the submission of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare: Children's Welfare Association of Victoria, who VCOSS recognises as having significant expertise in the wellbeing of children, young people and families.

Core Principles

VCOSS advocates that there are a number of core principles that should frame any legislative, policy, governance and service delivery reforms in relation to strengthening the capacity of children, young people and families.

Any reforms must begin with a process that places services and structures within the context of both wider community structures and children's and young people's rights. VCOSS advocates that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC) must underpin the Government's and the community's response to ensuring the wellbeing of children and young people. CROC provides a framework to which all legislation, policy and programs must adhere, and imposes responsibilities upon governments to give effect to these rights.

The preamble of the convention states that "... childhood is entitled to special care and assistance; ... that the family ... should be afforded the necessary assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities [to the wellbeing of its children, and] ... that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding".²

Three articles within CROC are of particular relevance:

- Article 3: In all actions concerning children whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration.
- Article 12: The rights of the child to express their view and for this to receive due consideration.
- Article 19: States have the responsibility and obligation to take all legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect children from all forms of abuse. Such protective measures should include social programs and support for both the child and those who care for the child.

Any reforms proposed should be underpinned by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Secondly, any reforms must begin from the standpoint of promoting wellbeing and strengthening the capacity of children, young people and families. The starting point should not be child protection. A much broader, systems wide approach is required. To ensure the emphasis is on the promotion of wellbeing, it is important that when approaching families, we begin with the assumption that we are assessing for change rather than risk. In doing so, we approach families with a capacity building framework rather than a deficit model.

The whole community, including government, must have promoting the wellbeing and connectedness of children, young people and families as a core responsibility. This requires a whole of government framework. It is not sufficient to focus only on those portfolios that fall within the Department of Human Services if real, sustainable change is to be achieved for Victorian children, young people and families. Greater integration and linkages across Government policy and service areas is urgently required, extending from family support, health, child protection, schools and police, to housing, mental health, drug and alcohol, disability and domestic violence services, and to broader community strengthening infrastructure such as neighbourhood houses. In order to move to a whole of government framework, it is crucial that improved linkages are made across each of these areas.

Lastly, the significance of social capital – our social connectedness – within our communities also cannot be ignored when undertaking reforms to any area of policy. Social capital encompasses the links that create society,³ and relates to the resources available within communities as a consequence of networks of mutual support, reciprocity, trust and obligation.⁴ Within the concept of social capital, is the principle of social justice.

The values of social justice are an essential factor in strengthening social capital in communities. These values encompass equal worth of all citizens and their equal right to be able to participate in the community and meet their basic needs.⁵ Social justice can be defined as the universal availability of opportunities and services that provide equitable outcomes for the diverse range of

community needs, life situations and aspirations for all people on the basis of citizenship⁶, and can be described as having four principles:⁷

- Equity:** meaning fairness in the distribution of social and economic resources;
- Equality:** meaning equal, effective and comprehensive civil, legal and industrial rights for all;
- Access:** meaning fair and equal access to services;
- Participation:** meaning the opportunity to participate fully in personal development, community life and decision-making.

VCOSS advocates that the above four principles of social justice should form the basis of any reforms proposed.

VCOSS strongly supports the Minister for Community Services' stated intention to develop a broad-based response to the protection of children, outlined in the 4 June Ministerial Statement, *Putting Victoria's Children First*. To achieve this, an emphasis on promoting wellbeing, increased resources, a broad, integrated, whole of government framework and an independent Children and Young Person's Commission is required.

Indigenous children, young people and communities

The *Protecting Children* report recognised the particular challenges in responding to the over-representation of Indigenous children and young people within the child protection system. VCOSS views the omission of any options to address this over-representation as a key failing in the report. The continuing high rates of removal of aboriginal children and young people from their families remains of significant concern to VCOSS. Although comprising less than one per cent of Victorians aged 0-17, aboriginal children represent 8.3 per cent of the total number of current clients within the child protection system, and are 6 times more likely to be removed from their family by Child Protection Services.⁸ The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) notes that the Victorian:⁹

- child notification substantiation rate ratio Indigenous to other was 9.5:1
- child on Care and Protection Orders rate ratio Indigenous to other was 12.4:1
- child in 'Out-of-Home Care rate ratio Indigenous to other was 13.8:1

VCOSS advocates the critical importance of ensuring that an integrated system is inclusive of Aboriginal cultural identity, values and perspectives. Of equal importance alongside this, is the need to work with Indigenous organisations and families along the continuum of care and support. VCOSS refers the Panel to the submission of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) for a more detailed discussion.

VCOSS urges the Panel to recommend that the Government to continue to work with VACCA, other Indigenous organisations and Indigenous communities to strengthen the capacity of Indigenous families and communities, so as to reduce the unacceptably high rates of removal of aboriginal children and young people from their families. The Government must direct increased resources towards such action if it is to ensure that it is not creating another Stolen Generation. The Government must implement its *Pathways to Reconciliation* statement, "[that] Aboriginal communities will be in the driving seat of policy development and service delivery, strengthened by additional resources," as part of any legislative, policy, administrative and service delivery reforms.

RECOMMENDATION

- Any reforms across legislation, policy, governance and service delivery must be inclusive of Aboriginal cultural identity, values and perspectives.

Whole of government framework

The importance of a whole of government framework as a basis for any integrated model cannot be overemphasised. A whole of government framework requires commitment from the Premier and all Ministers and ‘joined-up’ legislation, policy, funding, governance and service provision. A whole of government framework must facilitate the provision of services and structures aimed at promoting the wellbeing of children and young people, preventing abuse and neglect and providing comprehensive, integrated and sustained support.

Within a whole of government framework, all government departments must have the wellbeing of children and young people as a key responsibility. Along-side this, there must be inter-divisional and inter-departmental integration to effectively promote and support the wellbeing of children, young people and families.

RECOMMENDATION

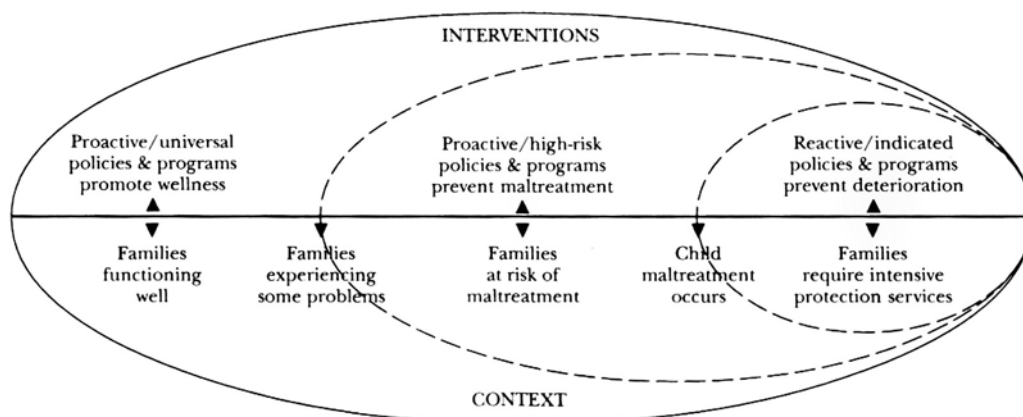
- A whole of government framework must be the basis for any integrated service and structure model.

Care continuum

VCOSS advocates that a broader approach across services and systems is required that strengthens the capacity of children, young people and their families, through the provision of comprehensive, integrated, timely and sustained support for all Victorian children, young people and families, particularly those who are vulnerable. A broad approach must promote the wellbeing of communities and that of individual children, young people and families.

To promote the wellbeing of children, young people and families a whole-of-government social and economic infrastructure investment is required, which encompasses change to legislation, policy, governance and service delivery. A whole-of-government approach aimed at promoting the wellbeing of all children, young people and families should reflect a care continuum. The *promotion – prevention – protection continuum* model,¹⁰ is one approach that recognises that wellbeing ranges from adequate functioning to those at risk. This model is similar to the approach evident in Public Health policy. Appropriate and sustained interventions should be available to children, young people and families at each point along this continuum, as represented in the diagram below:

The Promotion-Prevention-Protection Continuum¹¹



The development of a care continuum model supports the development of a range of service responses and structures to improve outcomes for children, young people and families. VCOSS

refers the Panel to the submission of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare: CWAV for further discussion around developing a range of service responses.

Prevention and early intervention focus

VCOSS advocates that a broader emphasis is required on strengthening the capacity of children, young people and family support, not solely on child protection. This broader emphasis must include a focus on strengthening the capacity of children, young people and families across health, education, housing, mental health, domestic violence, disability, and transport.

There is compelling evidence that investing in prevention and early intervention support services for children, young people and their families are both crucially important in preventing life-long poverty and exclusion, and an effective use of government resources, reducing investment levels in the longer term.¹² Further, There is strong evidence that early prevention and primary prevention family services¹³ can be highly effective in achieving positive sustainable outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and their families. Such outcomes include improved social and community connections, increased confidence and skills around parenting and maintaining children's behaviours, increased awareness, acceptance of and access to services, improved family conflict resolution skills and family relationships leading to decreased family violence and conflict, and improved household management skills.¹⁴

VCOSS has major concerns regarding the significant levels of demand for early prevention and primary prevention family services.¹⁵ For example, in order to prioritise demand, level one families are being placed on waiting lists while under-resourced family services meet the needs of level two and three families. "The risk of this is that the needs of Level One families escalate to higher levels of needs complexity and intensity, where greater levels of support and intervention are required, and positive, sustained outcomes become much harder to achieve."¹⁶ The resourcing of early prevention and prevention family services must be addressed in any systemic reform.

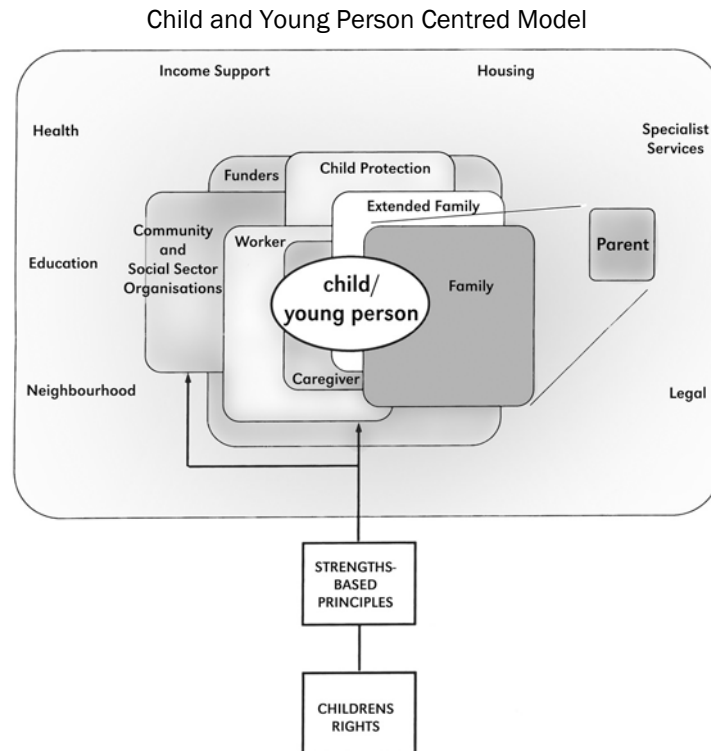
Investing in prevention and early intervention is a long-term investment in social outcomes,¹⁷ and should be a core element of any reforms. Any sustained, long-term investment should reflect the *promotion-prevention-protection continuum* model. Critically, any change must prevent children, young people and families from entering the child protection system by ensuring the provision of comprehensive, integrated and sustained support for all children, young people and families, that strengthens their capacity and connectedness.

RECOMMENDATION

Increased social and economic investment that promotes the wellbeing of children, young people and families across a range of services is required, including family support services, maternal and child health, community health, mental health, education, housing, transport etc, to ensure timely, integrated and sustained support for all Victorian families.

Child and Young Person Centred Model

A child and young person centred model, based on children’s rights and strength-based principles, needs to be the framework for policy and programs to strengthen the capacity of the children, young people and their families.¹⁸ In placing the child and young person at the centre, the focus must be on supporting the social and community infrastructure around the child, young person and their family, as outlined in the diagram below:¹⁹



Within the child and young person centred model, positive change is achieved when the people and structures around the child or young person are resourced. The assumption is not that more workers or services will make a difference, but rather that what makes sustainable change is strengthening the connections of children, young people and families and their participation in community life. The emphasis is on universal and specialist services contributing to enhancing the capacity of children, young people and families through providing immediate and appropriate sustained therapeutic opportunities that build resilience and connection. The development and strengthening of networks and connectedness for children, young people and families is vital. This occurs through investment in strong social and community infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATION

That a child and young person centred model, based on children’s rights and strength-based principles, be incorporated into any legislative, policy, governance and service delivery reforms to strengthen the capacity and connectedness of the children, young people and their families.

Integrated, universal system

To promote the wellbeing and connectedness of all children, young people and families – particularly those who are vulnerable – it is essential to develop a statewide, integrated system of universally accessible services²⁰ that are linked to a range of specialist supports.

VCOSS has advocated that a more integrated and sustained investment to support families in the care of their children is required to ensure families receive timely and ongoing support. The focus needs to not only be on tertiary responses, including a strong supported child protection

service, but just as importantly on accessible and timely preventative and early intervention programs such as *Best Start* and *Support for Families*.”

Any integrated system must:

- be culturally responsive to both Aboriginal communities and communities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds,
- include models that have the flexibility to respond effectively to local needs,
- include appropriate resourcing of a range of services across Government.
- build on existing structures,
- be sustainable,
- encourage partnerships,
- be universal,
- be multidisciplinary,
- be child and young person centred,
- be flexible,
- be evidence based,
- have a quality framework,
- be able to be evaluated,
- be able to be replicated,
- be informed by experience and policy,
- include integrated funding and administrative models, and
- be within a whole of government framework.²¹

VCOSS directs the Independent Panel to the submission of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) for further discussion of the critical importance of ensuring that an integrated system must be inclusive of Aboriginal cultural identity, values and perspectives. An integrated approach to the promotion of the wellbeing of children, young people and families must reflect Indigenous values and perspectives across legislation, policy development, governance and service provision.

Similarly, the diversity of needs across culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities must also be addressed within an integrated system. The *Protecting Children* report did not consider these issues in any depth. Any reforms must be flexible to enable locally specific responses to the needs of diverse communities and groups.

VCOSS endorses the partnership approach to promote the wellbeing of children, young people and families. As noted in the *Pathways to Partnership* report,²² “partnership and capacity building are not ends in themselves, but means to achieve the end of best outcomes for the children and young people in our care.” Within such an approach, all Victorian Government departments should have the wellbeing of children and young people as a core responsibility, to be incorporated into their strategic plans and key performance indicators.

VCOSS however, does not support the development of Community Child and Family Support Centres as outlined in the report. No convincing evidence exists to support such a direction. VCOSS advocates an approach that encompasses a continuum of care model, including prevention and early intervention, across all critical stages of the life cycle. As noted in the submission of the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), an equal focus is required on the issues for, experiences and developmental needs of young people, as well as that of children. VCOSS views resourcing and facilitating partnerships and linkages across policy, governance and the service system as being more able to achieve better outcomes than collocation of services. Indeed, for many families, collocation of services as suggested may prove counter-productive. The submission of the Children’s Welfare Association of Victoria (CWAV) provides a more detailed overview of the concerns in relation to the proposed Community Child and Family Support Centres.

VCOSS also has concerns regarding the outlined Community Support Networks. The Report suggests that these networks be an extension of the Government’s *Supporting Vulnerable Families Innovations Projects (Innovations Projects)*. VCOSS has two specific concerns.

Firstly, as an initiative to address the holistic needs of families who are vulnerable at the secondary end, the *Innovations Projects* are to be commended; the broad themes for an integrated strategy for demand management are sound.²³ However, while the focus of the *Innovations Projects* on reducing re-notification rates is a desirable objective, this focus is essentially child protection gate-keeping, and there is an insufficient emphasis on strengthening the capacity of families. The model locks families into a 'helping' model rather than a capacity building model, and ignores the broader structural issues that need to change. Greater emphasis on staff training and development, organisational development and both increased resources and greater resource flexibility is required to support the model. In developing the *Innovations Projects*, the emphasis must be on developing the capacity of families and better integration across government.

This last point is the second area of concern. Greater integration and linkages across Government policy and service areas is urgently required. The recommendation to include locally coordinated, community based services such as family support, health, child protection, schools and police is a positive beginning, but the Community Support Networks should also include housing, mental health, drug and alcohol, disability and domestic violence services, and link into broader community strengthening infrastructure such as neighbourhood houses. In order to move to a whole of government framework, it is crucial that improved linkages are made across each of these areas. It is not sufficient to focus only on those portfolios that fall within the Department of Human Services if real, sustainable change is to be achieved for Victorian children, young people and families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- An integrated system of universally accessible services that promotes the wellbeing and connectedness of children, young people and families must be broader than the system outlined in the report to include inter-divisional and inter-departmental integration.
- Greater integration and linkages across Government policy and service areas must be achieved, extending from family support, health, child protection, schools and police, to housing, mental health, drug and alcohol, disability and domestic violence services, and to broader community strengthening infrastructure such as neighbourhood houses, in order to move to a whole of government framework.
- An integrated system must be inclusive of Aboriginal cultural identity, values and perspectives.
- All Victorian Departments must have the wellbeing of children and young people as a core responsibility, to be incorporated into their strategic plans and key performance indicators.
- In any development and extension of the *Innovations Projects*, the emphasis must be on developing the capacity families, better integration across government, staff training, organisational development, and both increased resources and greater resource flexibility.

Intake, Assessment and Referral

VCOSS refers the Panel to the submissions of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare: CWAV and MacKillop Family Services for a discussion of the issues relating to intake, assessment and referral. VCOSS endorses the issues and concerns raised, and the recommendations made.

Out-of-home care

Providing holistic care and support for vulnerable children and young people in the child protection system in Victoria is vital.²⁴ VCOSS endorses the key direction within the *Public Parenting* document of building a culture of prevention by developing and strengthening cross-sectoral approaches for vulnerable families. Action to ensure this is urgently required, as the number of children and young people requiring out-of-home care in Victoria has increased 16 per cent between 1996 and 2002, despite a decline in the growth of the population aged 0-14 years.²⁵

VCOSS member organisations have raised concerns that they are participating in a system that further damages vulnerable children and young people, fearing the risks and potential for actual harms may outweigh the benefits. The lack of permanency is a key concern. In her 2002 Review, Dr Jan Carter found “major stakeholders, including foster carers, have seriously diminished confidence in [foster care’s] beneficial impact for many children ... because both the child’s needs, and his or her consequences of abuse and neglect, combine with a range of risks now inherent in placement in foster care ... to reduce its potential benefits”.²⁶ Dr Dorothy Scott reinforced this:

“Moreover, our current systems are badly failing to provide stability in children’s lives despite the permanency planning principles on which some of our legislative frameworks are supposed to be based ... For example on June 30, 2001 65% of children in out of home care in Victoria had had 4 or more previous placements.”²⁷

In the first instance, multi-dimensional support is required. Links between service systems need to be strengthened to more effectively address the complex needs of many children and young people in care. Secondly, a capacity building approach to foster carers is required, with an increased investment in training and support, and increased reimbursement rates for foster carers. Thirdly, new therapeutic and intensive treatment service models for out-of-home care services need to be identified and implemented. As a community, we need to provide better outcomes for vulnerable children and young people in care. We can no longer continue to simply invest further resources in a system that is failing. If children and young people are to be placed in out-of-home care, the critical issue is ensuring their wellbeing – the current system does not appear to be doing this.

VCOSS endorses the *Public Parenting* direction of broadening the range of out-of-home care options to better meet the complex needs of vulnerable children and young people, and welcomes the recognition of the need to develop new strategies and approaches.

*“Our mantra needs to be “structure and stability” in our out-of-home care system, as this is a precondition of children achieving a sense of security. Continuity of place as well as people in their lives is therefore critical. This needs to be done within a broader public health approach to child protection which emphasises primary and secondary prevention strategies”.*²⁸

An out-of-home care system with a broad range of evidence-based services that can be individually tailored to the needs of children, young people and their families needs to be developed.²⁹ Specialist long-term care services for children and young people with complex needs likely to be in care for a significant period of time must also be developed. Currently, placement options are too limited, insufficiently assessed and supported and lacking in follow-through after leaving care. Systemic changes are required to improve out of home care, including better assessments, a better range of placement options (e.g. vocational as well as residential, professional foster care), more therapeutic resources, and a system that continues to “be a good parent” to young people after they leave care

In developing additional models for providing out-of-home care, it is critical that the continuum of resourced placement options is strengthened. A number of models have been developed internationally.³⁰

VCOSS refers the Panel to the submission of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare – CWAV for a further discussion of the issues relating to out of home care, including kinship care and permanent care.

Leaving Care

Research continues to demonstrate that young people leaving care have significant poorer life outcomes than other young people. They have lower education attainment and higher unemployment rates, unstable employment patterns, higher levels of homelessness, early parenthood and ongoing poverty.³¹ The assumption to date appears to have been that the transition from care to independent living is a natural and easy one – clearly it is not.

Much more needs to be done to ensure appropriate levels of support for young people leaving care³² are in place to address the issues and challenges experienced by these young people. Currently, when a young person leaves care, the services and supports linked to their order cease.³³ There is an urgent need to provide support for young people after they leave care at least

until the age of 25. VCOSS directs the Panel to the Government's *Leaving Care Strategy* and urges greater action to ensure its implementation with appropriate levels of resourcing to better support the wellbeing of young people leaving care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strengthen multi-dimensional support through improving the links across service systems to more effectively address the complex needs of many children and young people in care.
- Identify and implement new therapeutic and intensive treatment service models for out-of-home care.
- Provide sustained and integrated support for young people after they leave care at least until the age of 25.

Governance

VCOSS endorses the partnership approach to promoting the wellbeing of children, young people and families, recognising that any reform will be dependent on successful and equal partnerships between government and non-government organisations.

However, VCOSS is concerned at the lack of clarity around the proposed 'integrated governance'. A key question in relation to governance is how can the integration and partnership functions of the proposed reforms be best achieved? A strong focus on networking and cooperation is critical here. Integrated governance must also include integrated accountability arrangements to enhance the effectiveness of the service system. Similarly, increased resources and training will also be required to support integrated governance models and improve the service system.

It is regrettable that the involvement of the non-government community sector is viewed almost as a problem in the *Protecting Children* report. There is much diversity in the non-government community sector, and this should be regarded as a positive in the development and strengthening of a broad approach to strengthening the capacity of children, young people and their families. Further the non-government community sector in Victoria can be regarded as more professionalised than in other states, and engages in a healthy dialogue with Government, which should be viewed as a strength in the Victorian context. It should be noted that some of the more innovative approaches are being practiced within the Victorian community services sector. and are worthy of greater attention, VCOSS members have highlighted that in many instances these approaches are being undermined by the Department of Human Services' inability to work in partnership between divisions and with the sector.

VCOSS supports increased accountability for effective service provision. VCOSS advocates that the Government should provide resources, including financial and training, for a service quality framework. The Centre for Excellence - CWAV has done extensive work on such a framework.

Any model must not involve further shifting of both financial and legal responsibilities to non government and community organisations without the resources to deliver better outcomes for families. The Government must ensure the sustainability of the sector via the various strategies normally included within an industry plan, such as workforce planning and infrastructure investment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Incorporate a strong focus on networking and cooperation within any integrated governance model
- Integrated governance must include integrated accountability arrangements, increased resources and training, and ensure that there is no further shifting of either financial or legal responsibilities to the government and community organisations.
- The sustainability of the community sector must be ensured via a range of strategies normally included within an industry plan, such as workforce planning and infrastructure investment.

Children and Young Person's Commission

VCOSS strongly advocates for the establishment of a Children's and Young People's Commission to advance the rights of children and young people at state level. A Commission would have a unique responsibility for protecting and promoting the rights of children and young people at the state level, and would also have a broad overview of the issues affecting children and young people in government, non-government and business sectors.

A Commission would enhance Victoria's commitment to protecting and promoting the rights, wellbeing and interests of children and young people. Importantly, a Children and Young People's Commissioner would provide a voice for, and advocate on behalf of children and young people. VCOSS refers the Panel to the model for a Commission outlined by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) in *Are you Listening to Us? The case for a Victorian Children and Young People's Commission*.³⁴ VCOSS is confident that such a model will provide 'a vital mechanism to promote a 'whole-of-government' approach on issues relating to children and young people.'³⁵

The key principles that should underpin a Victorian Children & Young Persons Commission are its independence, its legislative basis, its focus on children and young people up to the age of 18, its board perspective, its accessibility to children and young people, and its level of resourcing. It would be important that the Commission incorporate a strong focus on the wellbeing of Indigenous children and young people, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Lastly, a Children and Young People's Commission would also serve as an effective mechanism for monitoring service quality and accountability.

VCOSS welcomed the Government's intent in creating a voice for children through the recently established *Advocate for Children in Care*, located within the Department of Human Services. However, VCOSS views the Advocate model as lacking across a number of levels, including a mandate which only relates to care and protection and lacking the necessary independence to be a strong and effective voice for children and young people.

RECOMMENDATION

- Establish a Victorian Children's and Young People's Commission to advance the rights of children and young people at state level.

Implementation Strategy

The importance of sound implementation strategy for any proposed legislative, policy, governance and service delivery change cannot be overemphasised. The implementation strategy should detail short, medium and long-term objectives, funding, timelines and evaluation processes. It is critical that the support for broad, systemic reform across the sector is not lost.

RECOMMENDATION

- Include a sound implementation strategy to support any legislative, policy, governance and service delivery change.

Education – role of schools

Schools have a critical role to play in the development of children and young people, in their overall wellbeing, and are therefore integral to any strategy to support children and young people who are vulnerable.³⁶ Schools need to promote children's and young people's connectedness to school and the wider community by actively contributing to the creation of an environment in which their students feel secure, valued and listened to.³⁷ In order to promote this connectedness, schools need to work in partnership with the wider community of which they are a part, including community sector organisations and businesses.

Schools are particularly important in linking families into broader community supports; as for many families the school is the only institution with which they have extended contact.³⁸ Schools can serve as a more appropriate entry point for families to support, rather than child protection being the only entry point.

VCOSS has had an ongoing focus in advocating for better integration of education and community supports. Whole of government approaches that integrate and link education, health and community supports have been shown to maximise positive educational outcomes for children and young people that experience disadvantage.³⁹ Such approaches foster social inclusion and strengthen community involvement by building links and networks between schools and broader community supports. A whole-of-government, community-building approach to education is required to promote the wellbeing and strengthen the capacity children, young people and families.

RECOMMENDATION

- Increase the linkages between and integration of schools and community supports in order to promote the wellbeing of children, young people and families.

- ¹ See <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>
- ² Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, see: <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>
- ³ Cox, E., 1998, Wellbeing and quality of life. In R.Eckersley, Ed., *Measuring progress: Is life getting better?* Collingwood: CSIRO Publishing.
- ⁴ ABS, 2000, *Measuring social capital: current collections and future directions*.
- ⁵ Commission on Social Justice & Institute for Public Policy Research, 1994, *Social justice – Strategies for National Renewal*, London: Random House.
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