

# Western Australian Auditor General's Report



## Young People Leaving Care



Report 2: August 2018-19

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WESTERN AUSTRALIAN AUDITOR GENERAL'S REPORT

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**Young People Leaving Care**

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Report 2  
August 2018-19



**THE PRESIDENT  
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL**

**THE SPEAKER  
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

### **YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING CARE**

This report has been prepared for Parliament under the provisions of section 25 of the *Auditor General Act 2006*.

Performance audits are an integral part of my Office's overall program of audit and assurance for Parliament. They seek to provide Parliament and the people of WA with assessments of the effectiveness and efficiency of public sector programs and activities, and identify opportunities for improved performance.

The audit assessed whether the Department of Communities effectively supports young people leaving its care to successfully transition into independent living.

I wish to acknowledge the staff at the Department of Communities for their cooperation with this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C Spencer".

CAROLINE SPENCER  
AUDITOR GENERAL  
22 August 2018

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## Auditor General's overview

Making the transition to independent living can be a difficult and risky time for young people. This is particularly so for young people who have been in care. The trauma many have experienced impacts their physical and mental health and their engagement with education. When they leave care they can find it difficult to get a house or a job and may have no one to turn to for help if things go wrong. To transition to independent living successfully, they need support.



In many ways the support that care leavers need is not complex – somewhere to live, linking to education and training, help finding a job and getting healthcare. Providing that support can be complex. Partly, because these young people can be difficult to engage, but also because effective support relies on a network of government agencies and service providers working together. While this has happened for some young people, it has not been consistent enough to make sure that all the young people who need support get it.

Combining 5 agencies to form the Department of Communities offers a real opportunity to remove some of the barriers to joined-up support for young people leaving care. But there is still much work to do to achieve effective coordination between the Department and its service providers, and to get other government agencies to be an active part of meeting care leavers' needs. My recommendations are intended to enable the Department to make and monitor those changes. The results should be better targeted support for more of the young people leaving care, helping more of them make a successful and stable transition to life after care.

# Executive summary

## Introduction

This audit assessed whether the Department of Communities (the Department) effectively supports young people leaving its care to successfully transition into independent living by examining:

- Is the Department clear about what it needs to deliver?
- Does the Department ensure that young people get the support they need?
- Are support services making a positive difference for young people leaving care?

## Background

Young people who are removed from their family and placed into care are some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Many have experienced severe neglect or other forms of abuse. This trauma can have an ongoing impact on their mental and physical health regardless of how well they are looked after while in care. When they leave care they can find it hard to get a house or a job, and they often do not have a family safety net when things go wrong.

In the last 10 years the number of children in care has more than doubled. At 31 December 2017, there were 4,800 children and young people in the care of the Department.

The *Children and Community Services Act 2004* (the Act) requires the Department to help a child who is about to leave care prepare for this and provide support after they have left care, until they reach the age of 25 to:

- find accommodation
- undertake education and training
- get employment
- access legal advice
- access health and counselling services.

The Department delivers 'leaving care support' by:

- requiring district office staff to commence 'leaving care planning' when the young person turns 15. Leaving care planning involves outlining clear goals relating to independent living in a document called a care plan. The Act requires that each young person has a care plan which is reviewed at least once every 12 months. Policy requires that the care plan be modified when the child reaches 15 years to specifically address the young person's leaving care needs
- providing financial support for eligible young people after they have left care. The Department makes available a total of around \$900,000 each year to help young people that have left care with furnishing and equipping accommodation, expenses connected with education or training and any other expenses that the CEO considers appropriate. Under the Act the provision of the financial support is discretionary
- providing around \$2 million per annum to 3 leaving care providers, who also support young people who are preparing to leave care and those who have left care. The leaving care providers contracted by the Department provide support up to the age of 25. Young people should be referred by the Department as part of leaving care

planning. Referrals can also be made by the young person, their carer/s, or a government or non-government agency involved with the young person.



Source: OAG

**Figure 1: Approach to helping young people leave care in WA**

## Audit conclusion

The leaving care support the Department provides makes a positive difference to the young people who receive it. However, about 65% of young people who are eligible for support do not get it early enough or at all, putting them at higher risk of being homeless, unemployed, missing out on education and training, and not getting the physical and mental health care they need.

Many care leavers, especially those with complex needs, are not well prepared to leave care and start living independently. Planning for young people leaving care and referrals to leaving care providers often happens too late, and many young people are not effectively engaged in their plans. As a result, the young person's needs are often not adequately captured. Care plans do not identify high risk young people or those with complex needs, and match them to more extensive support.

Overall, the Department, leaving care providers and other agencies are not effectively communicating and working together to link young people to services, and young people leaving care do not receive priority access to services like housing or health care. The Department does not know if young people leaving its care receive the support they need, or what happens to them. Without this information it is difficult for the Department to improve the effectiveness of its support for young people leaving its care.



## Key findings

### Support from leaving care providers can make a positive difference

A review of service provider reports over 3 years provided examples of support that changed young people's lives for the better. This was corroborated by young people we spoke to. Specifically, leaving care support assisted them to:

- access stable and long-term accommodation
- re-engage with education and training
- look for employment
- access Centrelink payments and attend appointments
- connect with someone to rely on when they needed help.

Some specific programs support young people with complex needs and show positive outcomes, however these tend to be resource intensive. A program called Living Independently for the First Time ensured care leavers had housing and more extensive and flexible support based on need. The program supports 12 young people with complex needs. It is not available in all districts as it is still a pilot program.

### Limited capacity in services impact on the support available to care leavers

Long waitlists and unavailability of services in some areas impact on when and how much support care leavers get. The Department is required by law to provide support to care leavers who qualify for assistance up to the age of 25, but most are not accessing what they need. Only 34% of eligible young people accessed leaving care support between 2014 and 2017.

At December 2017, 119 young people eligible for leaving care support were waiting to access support. Because the Department does not collect or routinely monitor information on how long it takes to access support services, we could not establish trends or average wait times. Evidence from a small number of individual cases showed young people waiting 18 months for support.

In some remote locations the Department is the only provider of support. The lack of access to leaving care providers in these areas impacts on when and how much support care leavers get. For example, in West Kimberley the leaving care worker role is staffed once a week which is impractical for a large geographical area with at least 31 young people in the leaving care phase. In remote areas such as Fitzroy Crossing there are no leaving care support services to assist young people leaving care. Since 2013, 17 young people in the area left care and were eligible for ongoing support.

In the metropolitan area, support services are only available Monday to Friday during business hours. If a problem occurs outside of these hours care leavers have to rely on Crisis Care which is a telephone information and counselling service for people in crisis needing urgent help. For some young people the service does not always work effectively for them.

### The Department is not delivering support consistently because planning and referrals are late and access to support is much more difficult without them

#### *The Department does not start planning for leaving care early enough*

In 82% of cases we looked at, this process did not commence at 15 as required by the Department's policy. This increases the risk of needing crisis management because less time is available to arrange all the support services required.

The content of care plans does not adequately identify critical leaving care needs and steps to assist in meeting them. Our review showed that critical needs such as housing, education, employment and contingency plans were not always included. Over 80% of the files we reviewed did not contain a clear plan for the young person's immediate future, nor were they updated to reflect the need or situation of the young person at the time of leaving care.

The Department does not know if its support workers have commenced leaving care planning on time because it does not routinely check. This is partly because the information is not captured within its systems as a measure, and so it would have to review each individual case file. The Department monitors the number of young people who have reached 15, but not whether the planning process has started.

The extent of a young person's participation in decision-making and planning for their future was not always evident even though a large majority attend their care planning meetings. Just over half (53%) of the young people had not completed the departmental tool (Viewpoint) which seeks to assist young people in communicating their needs during their transition period.

#### *Referrals to leaving care providers are also not occurring early enough or at all*

For half of the cases we reviewed, the young person had not been referred to a leaving care provider at all. In other cases, referrals occurred just before the young person turned 18. Providers reported that this made it difficult to build a relationship with the young person and reduced the chances of successful outcomes.

#### *The self-initiated nature of support means that not all young people approach the Department for assistance*

In over half (64%) of the cases we reviewed, we found no evidence that the care leaver returned to seek further support despite often having a high need for assistance. For those that did seek support it was often for one-off payments for simple items like driving lessons, training courses, white goods and dental appointments. This means that many are not getting help with the most challenging aspects of becoming independent such as sustaining housing and employment.

#### *Leaving care work is not adequately prioritised in district offices*

Not having dedicated leaving care staff members has meant that support is not always a priority or consistently delivered. Designated leaving care officers at district offices have other roles and responsibilities. Their leaving care work tends to be limited to responding if a young person returns to the Department for assistance after leaving care. The leaving care officers do not monitor what leaving care preparation is happening for a young person while the young person is still in care.

Service providers and young people we spoke to advised that there were inconsistencies in different district offices, relating to what financial support is approved. The approval of the funds is at the discretion of the district directors. The Department has consistently underspent the leaving care support funds by an average of 27% in the last 3 years.

### **Agencies and providers do not effectively collaborate to improve access to critical services**

Government has not achieved its intended aim of seamless support and providing priority access to critical services for young people leaving care. Despite the vulnerability and complexity of need, they are queued with everyone else or in some cases are denied access due to administrative errors. Service providers advised that they were unable to assist eligible young people to get public housing because applications had not been completed on time.

For example:

- one provider reported to the Department that 70% of young people turning 18 that were referred to them had not been placed on a housing waitlist
- another also reported to the Department that 3 young people were not on the housing priority list because their case worker did not complete paper work before they turned 18. This meant that the young people could not access public housing even as an option of last resort.

In 2009, Government established an agreement to provide priority access to services for children and young people in care to improve their life outcomes. With recent machinery of government changes, the Department has a good opportunity to join up housing, disability, child protection and youth justice services and include links to education and health services.

Poor information exchange between district offices and providers can also affect whether a young person accesses support. Some areas of concern include:

- referral documents omitted key information making it difficult to provide support
- lack of clarity on roles and expectation of what each should deliver
- poor engagement from Department staff and late or no responses to emails and telephone calls.

### **The Department does not adequately monitor the performance of service providers, so it lacks key information to improve support**

The Department does not adequately monitor how well providers meet the needs of young people. It also does not track which identified needs were met after the age of 18. It relies on services providers to monitor and report on what they are delivering. This includes whether it referred the young person to other providers and the type of assistance the provider gave, but does not report on whether the young person's needs were ultimately met. Not all young people remain in contact with the service providers so no information for these young people is available. This means that the Department cannot adequately determine the impact of support services.

Young people are not routinely contacted to determine whether support is provided to those who need it. In almost half of the cases we looked at the young person was not in a stable living arrangement at the time they left care. These varied from young people relying on crisis care for short term accommodation, environments that the Department considers unsafe or in one case, homeless with a significant debt. The Department did not ensure that young people knew they were entitled to further support after they left its care. Without a routine approach to contacting young people and informing them of entitlements, many miss out on support that is available to them.

The Department has limited information on long-term outcomes of young people who have left care. Although it commissioned a report in January 2016 it did not look at whether young people had received the services they needed and whether these services had made a difference for them. The report explored outcomes for young people who have had a care experience and looked at:

- physical and mental health
- high school education
- mortality rates
- corrective services.

It did not look at outcomes on tertiary education, housing, employment or income as data was not available. The children in this study were in care for varying lengths of time and the report did not examine the effect of different care experiences on outcomes.

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## Recommendations

The Department should:

1. Prepare young people more effectively for leaving care by establishing systems and reporting across all district offices that:
  - a. alerts case workers when to start leaving care planning (i.e. when a young person turns 15 or earlier if appropriate)
  - b. ensures care leavers are informed of their entitlements post care
  - c. provides streamlined and timely referrals to leaving care providers
  - d. reports on key milestones achieved when the young person exits care at 18
  - e. provides information on how effectively identified needs have been met when young people leave care.

**Department of Communities response:** Agreed

**Implementation timeframe:** Commence within 12 months

2. Improve collaboration and communication between agencies and staff that will
  - a. encourage more effective partnerships between agencies and explore ways of working together to fast track access to critical services
  - b. consider reviewing priority housing waitlist processes to allow all young people who have been in care to be eligible for public housing if they need it
  - c. improve communication between district offices and leaving care providers to address forward planning, service access and roles and responsibilities of each party
  - d. clarify, communicate and encourage better understanding of guidelines on the use and approval of leaving care funds.

**Department of Communities response:** Agreed

**Implementation timeframe:** Commence within 12 months

3. Develop a more flexible and proactive response to the needs of the care leaver that will
  - a. ensure that the care planning process adequately assesses key risks to provide priority access to support and services, particularly for those with complex needs
  - b. include measures in reports from service providers that provide information on outcomes for young people leaving care specifically in the key areas of housing, education and training and employment
  - c. cost and explore more flexible approaches to providing support
    - i. consider additional programs for those who are high risk or with complex needs
    - ii. consider extending Departmental support and case management for those that need it after 18.

**Department of Communities response:** Agreed

**Implementation timeframe:** Commence within 12 months

## Response from the Department of Communities

Every child deserves the opportunity to reach adulthood equipped with the skills and abilities necessary to live healthy, happy and safe lives. For some children, their lives are impacted by the events that befall their families and caregivers, who for circumstances outside of their control are not able to offer them the nurturing and support that is so important to their health and wellbeing. For these children, the State is required to assume the role of parenting and depending on the individual circumstances the care can be for short, medium or long term.

The Department of Communities (Communities) takes this responsibility very seriously and whilst every effort is made to reunify children and young people with their families, those who enter care often do so under traumatic circumstances. Approximately 230 young people exit care each year, and up until June 2018 there were over 900 young people between 14 and 17 years who were being supported through leaving care planning. The circumstances of each young person are diverse and multifaceted and the needs of a young person living in a regional and remote location can be very different to the needs of those living in a metropolitan location.

A number of improvements are being progressed through planned Out of Home Care reforms and following the review of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*, nine recommendations relating to care planning are being considered. Communities can always improve our responses, and the findings from the Auditor General's Report will help shape these improvements going forward. The Machinery of Government changes provide the opportunities to amalgamate the critical components of service delivery such as child protection, housing, health, disability, education and youth justice to enable seamless and place based services to operate. This approach will allow government to improve outcomes for those children and young people who for no fault of their own, are placed in out of home care. We will continue to strive for better outcomes so every child or young person coming into State care will be supported to reach their full potential to live safe and healthy lives as adults.

## Audit focus and scope

The audit assessed whether the Department of Communities (the Department) effectively supports young people leaving its care to successfully transition into independent living. It focused on 3 key questions:

1. Is the Department of Communities clear about what it needs to deliver?
2. Does the Department of Communities ensure that children get the support they need?
3. Are support services making a positive difference for children leaving care?

In conducting the audit, we:

- reviewed policies, procedures and key documents
- tested 60 (30 opened and 30 closed) cases of young people transitioning out or that have left the care of the Department
- interviewed key Department staff including the Advocate for Children in Care
- ran 2 focus groups, 3 semi-structured interviews and 2 informal conversations with care leavers to hear their experiences of leaving care.

We also visited 2 district offices in the metropolitan area (Armadale and Midland) and 2 regional areas (West Kimberley-Broome and South West-Bunbury) and met with all the funded leaving care service providers across the state:

- Salvation Army Cross Roads West
- Mission Australia Navig8
- Wanslea Family services.

Sub-contracted service providers:

- Broome Youth and Family Hub (Sub contracted by Salvation Army)
- Albany Youth Support Association (Sub contracted by Mission Australia).

Other stakeholders we interviewed included:

- Create Foundation WA
- Foster Carers Association
- Anglicare WA and other members of the Home stretch campaign committee
- Aboriginal Legal Service WA
- The Office of Commissioner for Children and Youth
- Perth Inner City Youth Support
- Indigo Junction.

We focused on young people in the care of the Department aged between 15 to 17 and those eligible for ongoing support post care under the age of 25. We did not look at children in care aged under 15 or those who left care prior to reaching 15. The audit covered the period of 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2017.

This was a broad scope performance audit, conducted under section 18 of the *Auditor General Act 2006* and in accordance with Australian Auditing and Assurance Standards. Performance audits focus primarily on the effective management and operations of agency programs and activities. The approximate cost to complete this audit was \$411,000.



## Audit findings

### Support services make a difference but most young people are not accessing them

#### Support services can make a positive difference for those who access them

Reports and interviews with leaving care providers and young people showed that support services made a difference to those who accessed them. Some of the positive results reported included:

- young people re-establishing contact with family members
- better access to long-term accommodation
- improved chances of employment through completing training
- improved basic life skills such as maintaining personal hygiene, clean living environment, cooking, shopping and managing personal finances and practical support to access Centrelink payments and attending appointments
- connection and someone to rely on when they needed help.

#### Case study – Transition to independent living

'John', was referred to a leaving care provider at 17 while he was living in residential care. He was not enrolled in training or education and had mental health needs.

He rarely left his bed, was disconnected and not engaged in any social activity. He had significant difficulty finding accommodation and he lacked the skills to maintain a tenancy.

This placed him at significant risk of homelessness.

**John** was allocated a leaving care support worker who assisted him with securing public housing just before he left care. He was then assisted in securing financial assistance through Transition to Independence Living Allowance (TILA). The funds were used to furnish his unit.

The leaving care worker helped him learn how to make his bed, wash dishes, sweep and mop the floor and pay bills. He was linked to a psychiatrist and supported to attend.

This resulted in a positive change in his outlook. He resumed his education and was supported to attend school until he attended regularly on his own. He completed his course and is currently seeking employment. His journey continues with ongoing support and encouragement to ensure that the progress is maintained.



Source OAG, image supplied by Salvation Army

**Figure 2: Example of support services making a positive difference**

We found one program, Living Independently for the First Time (LIFT), that supports young people with highly complex needs and is showing some positive outcomes. The program ensures that all participants have access to safe accommodation with ongoing support to maintain tenancy, manage drug and alcohol addiction and justice or behavioural issues. Participants have access to 24/7 support through the organisation’s youth services if needed. The volatile lives of the young people involved mean that the program is resource intensive and progress can often be slow.

LIFT was established in 2014, through a partnership between the Midland District office, a local not for profit and the former Department of Housing. The program supports up to 12 young people with complex needs at any one time. It only operates in the Midland district and is not available in other districts. Progress reports showed that:

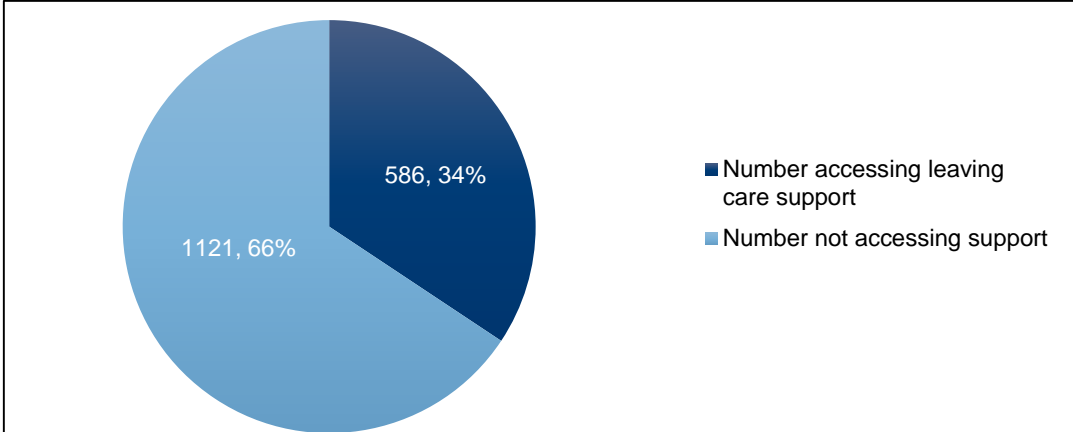
- 100% of clients had a plan that guided intensive case management
- 100% of the clients had been provided access to safe accommodation and this remained available even when they chose alternative arrangements at times
- 80% had made gains across key domains of independent living skills, money management and tenancy skills
- 70% of clients were engaged in mental health and alcohol and other drugs counselling.

Research shows a greater chance of poor outcomes for those that have left care and highlights the importance and need for support. This was also reflected in the cases we looked at where:

- 80% of care leavers did not complete high school education
- 54% were not linked to training or employment when they left care
- 43% of did not have stable accommodation when they left care.

**Most care leavers do not access support early enough or at all even though they need it**

Under the Act, the Department is required to provide support to eligible young people under the age of 25. However, most young people do not access the services they need or when the potential for positive outcomes is optimal. Between June 2014 and December 2017 only 34% (586) of eligible young people both in and out of care accessed leaving care support (see Figure 3). We expected that more young people would access support given the positive difference these services make for those that access them.



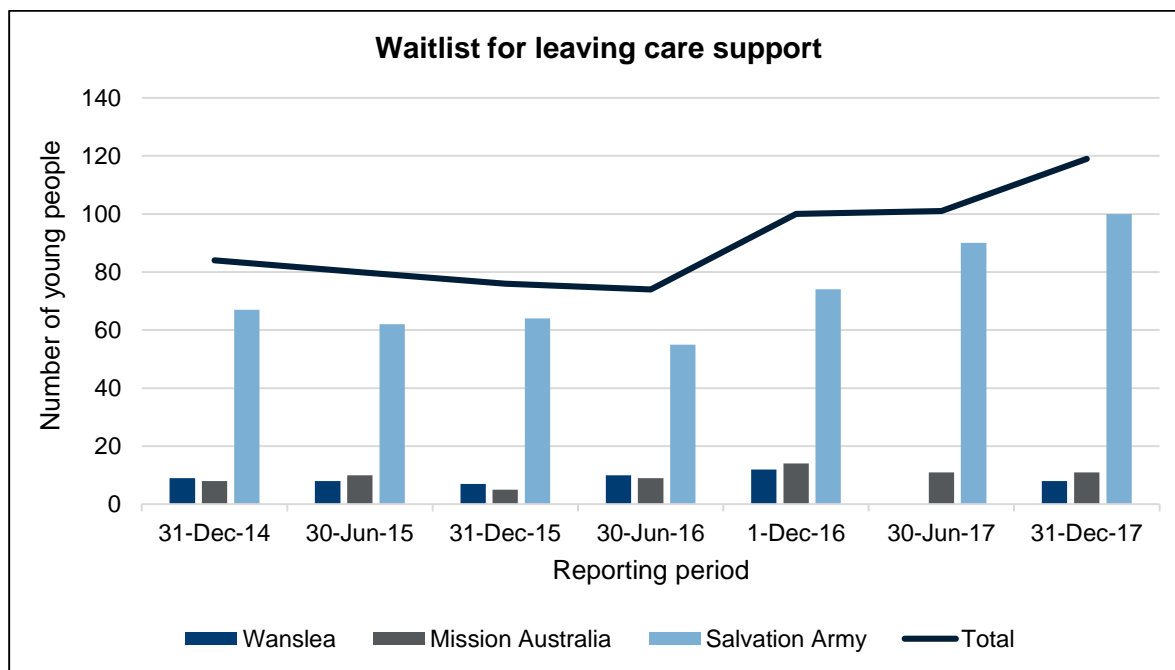
Source: OAG analysis of Department of Communities information

**Figure 3: Number and percentage of young people accessing leaving care services, 2014-17**



*Waitlists, limited capacity or unavailability of services impact on when and how much support care leavers get*

There is an increasingly long waitlist for support, so young people often cannot access services when they need them. At 31 December 2017, 119 young people were waiting to access support (see Figure 4). It was difficult to establish average wait times because the Department does not collect this information. This increases the risk that young people that most need assistance are not supported at the right time. Evidence from a small number of individuals showed young people waiting 18 months for support.



Source: OAG analysis of Department of Communities information

**Figure 4: Waitlist for leaving care support, 2014-17**

Lack of leaving care providers in some remote areas, unavailability of support outside of business hours and limited capacity also impact on when and how much support care leavers get. Figure 5 shows the challenges of providing leaving care in some regional areas and the need for creative and innovative ways of providing support.

**Case study – Leaving care support in remote areas**

The West Kimberley is located in the far north of Western Australia towards the coast. The region includes the towns of Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing and a number of remote communities such as Looma and Bidyadanga.

The leaving care support worker role is staffed one day a week and based in Broome nearly 400 km from Fitzroy Crossing and 220 km from Derby. At 31 December 2017, the region had 31 young people in the leaving care phase.

In remote areas such as Fitzroy Crossing there are no support services to assist young people leaving care. At least 17 young people left care in the area and were eligible for ongoing support in the last 5 years. As at 31 December 2017, there were 23 young people in care but with only 2 in the leaving care phase. Although district officers can and do provide support while they're still in care, there are almost no options for care leavers, especially for those disengaged with the Department. Consequently more creative and innovative ways of providing support is vital.

Source: OAG based on Department of Communities information

**Figure 5: Provision of leaving care support in west Kimberly**

An increase in referrals was also putting pressure on the providers as they all reported to be working at capacity. Consequently, new cases had to be placed on the waitlist. The Department and leaving care providers do not have agreed capacity limits for how many young people can or should be supported at any given time. In the South West, the service was at capacity with 40 young people to 1 staff member providing leaving care support. This was a similar case for the Great Southern with 22 cases to a staff member working 2 days a week. The state-wide provider was supporting 153 young people.

The service providers are contracted to provide support 51 weeks of the year, Monday to Friday, generally between 8.30am to 4.30pm. However, the nature and complexity of the issues that young people face mean that a crisis or critical situation is likely to happen at any time.

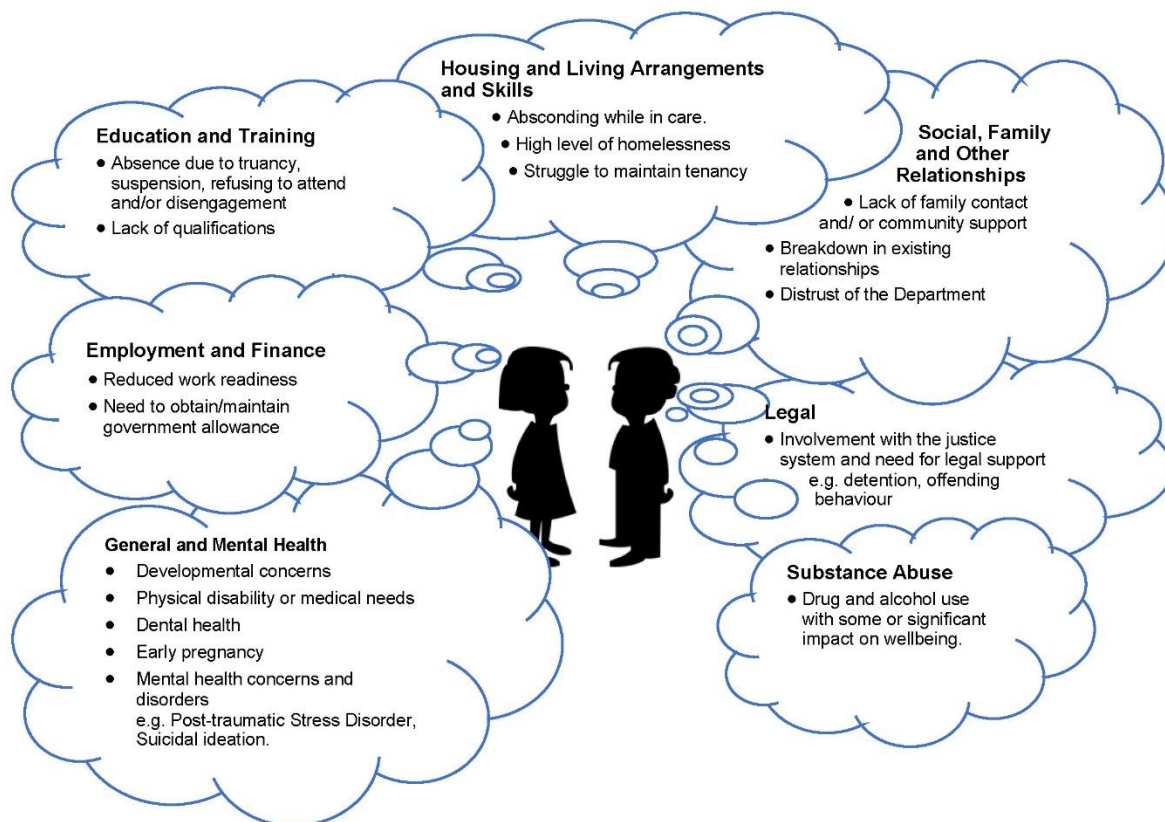
Young people we spoke to advised that if they urgently needed assistance after hours they would have to rely on Crisis Care which was not always ideal or effective at addressing their presenting need. Crisis Care is a telephone information and counselling service provided by the Department for any person in crisis.

## **The Department is not delivering support consistently because planning and referrals are late**

Effectiveness of the Department's approach to leaving care support relies on a number of key activities (also described in Figure 1):

- leaving care planning should start by age 15 at the latest
- referrals to services and other agencies need to be timely i.e. prior to leaving care
- the young person needs to know how to access support once they have left the care of the Department
- the Department and service providers need to be responsive to the young person's needs.

These 4 elements do not work consistently for all young people, especially those with complex needs. These may arise from a wide range of experiences which can result in greater difficulty during the transition to independence. Our review of cases showed many young people often experienced more than one of following issues.



Source: OAG based on Department of Communities information

**Figure 6: Complex needs facing care leavers**

## The Department does not start planning for leaving care at the right time and the quality is insufficient

*Most leaving care plans are not completed early enough*

When a young person turns 15 it is the responsibility of the relevant district office to modify their care plan to reflect leaving care arrangements for the following areas as described in the Department's Casework Practice Manual:

- health
- education and employment
- housing and accommodation
- family and social relationships
- life skills development
- financial support
- identity and culture
- legal and financial matters
- support networks.

In 82% of cases we looked at, planning did not commence at 15 as required by the Department's policy. Early planning is vital as it contributes to a gradual transition from care with adequate and appropriate support for the young person after they leave. This is even

more important for young people that do not have the support of family during the transition. Late planning increases the risk of crisis management and poor outcomes because less time is available to arrange all the support services required.

The Department does not know whether support workers have commenced leaving care planning. It uses a proxy measure of monitoring the total number of young people in care that have turned 15, and does not track whether or not the care planning has commenced identifying and addressing the young person's leaving care needs. To do it with the current systems would mean reviewing each individual case file.

#### *The level of young people's participation in their leaving care planning is not always evident*

The extent of young people's participation in decision making and planning for their future was not always evident even though a large majority attended their care planning meetings. This increases the risk of non-engagement and minimises the chances of successful outcomes.

Care planning meetings are often attended by numerous people including the young person's carer, family or people with significant influence in the young person's life. This can make it difficult for the young person to effectively express their views and needs. Key stakeholders we interviewed advised that often young people did not engage effectively in the meetings.

To promote participation and engagement, the Department developed a self-interviewing web based program for all children and young people in care called Viewpoint. Support workers are required to invite all children and young people aged 5-17 to complete it as part of their planning process. In just over half (53%) of the cases we looked at, the young person did not complete the Departmental tool. The figures were even lower when compared across all 14-17 year olds in the care of the Department. Only 41% had completed the tool at 31 December 2017. Data was not available for the 15 to 17 year olds.

#### *The Department does not adequately assess critical needs and prioritise access to services*

The care plans do not adequately identify and address needs such as housing, education and employment and steps to assist in meeting them. Our review showed that most did not sufficiently cover critical needs. For example, a large majority of the plans we looked at did not identify contingency plans for where young people would live if their arrangements at the time fell through, even though they were at high risk of homelessness. This was particularly important given that 43% of young people in our sample did not have stable accommodation at the time of leaving care.

We expected that at a minimum the young person would be central to the process and the plans would clearly outline steps and measures for addressing:

- where they would live and a contingency should that arrangement fall through
- whether to study at TAFE or University, do an apprenticeship or get a job
- how they will earn money
- what support they will need
- what help they can get to set up their own home
- ensuring that they are provided with any social services appropriate to their needs.

Over 80% of the files we reviewed did not contain a clear and adequate plan for the young person's immediate future. Departmental guidelines require that at a minimum the plans include the young person's future goals and the support required to achieve them.

Review of care plans was also not timely to ensure that they remained current. The Act requires that they are reviewed at a minimum, once every 12 months. However, over half (53%) were not reviewed within 12 months. Of these, 17% of cases took over 18 months before they were reviewed by case workers. These plans were also not updated to reflect the need or situation of the young person at the time of leaving care. In December 2016, the Department introduced a needs assessment tool to assist in consistently identifying and assessing complexity of need for all children in care. However, work on allocating appropriate resources to the need was still ongoing at the time of the audit.

### **Referrals to leaving care providers are not occurring early enough or at all**

To increase the likelihood of good outcomes young people should be referred to leaving care providers as early as age 15. However, for half of the cases we reviewed we found no evidence that the young person had been referred to a leaving care support provider. This places them at even greater risk of not getting the support they need when they could most benefit.

All 3 service providers also reported a trend of increased number of referrals just a few months, and sometimes weeks, before the young person turned 18. Delayed referrals increase the risk of poor engagement because there is less time for providers to develop positive working relationships with the young person. This was corroborated by the Providers.

Young people can decline support from leaving care providers for various reasons. The number of young people who declined support is not consistently reported. However, between July 2014 to June 2015, one provider reported that 37 declined support. This can put them at even greater risk of poor outcomes because their options to support are limited. Factors that contributed to declining support can often include:

- distrust and disengagement with the Department
- long wait times for support
- poor rapport between the young person and the leaving care worker
- young people unaware that they had been referred to a leaving care provider.

### **The self-initiated nature of support means that not all young people approach the Department for assistance**

In addition to the support offered by the service providers, eligible young people can seek assistance from the Department after they have left care. In over half (64%) of the cases we reviewed, we found no evidence that the young person returned to seek further support. For those that did seek support it was often for one-off payments for simple items like clothing, driving lessons, white goods or dental appointments.

In nearly half of the cases we looked at we found no evidence that the young people had been informed of their right to seek assistance and how to do so. There is a risk that many are not getting help with the most challenging aspects of becoming independent such as sustaining housing and employment. The Department policies requires that all young people preparing to leave care are fully informed of their entitlement.

The self-initiated nature of support may not be suitable for those at significant risk of homelessness or ongoing involvement with the justice system. These young people may benefit from pro-active follow up, especially in the early stages of leaving care. For example, almost half of the young people in the cases we looked at were not in stable living arrangements at the time they left care. These varied from young people relying on crisis care for short term accommodation, environments that the Department considers unsafe or in one case, homeless with a significant debt. Without follow up these young people have no safety net.

## **Leaving care work is not prioritised in district offices**

Not having a dedicated leaving care staff member has meant that leaving care support is not always a priority. Each district has a designated leaving care officer to assist young people returning to the Department for assistance. However, we found that the staff in these roles had other responsibilities and that leaving care was an add on. The workers have no involvement when the young person is still in care. Although this is practical for the Department, it can make it difficult to assist the young person and provide the best possible support.

Service providers and young people we spoke to advised that there were inconsistencies in different district offices on what was approved when they returned to seek assistance. For example, some district officers funded 25 driving lessons while others only did 10, some funded 1-year ambulance cover and paid for white goods, and study while others did not. This increases the risk that two care leavers with similar requests could have one funded in one district and the other rejected in another.

The approval of the funds is at the discretion of the district directors. However, those we spoke to advised that they approved all reasonable requests. The Department has however consistently underspent the leaving care support funds by an average of 27% in the last 3 years (Appendix 1, Leaving care funding).

## **Agencies and providers do not effectively collaborate to improve access to critical services**

### **Interagency agreement on priority services for care leavers has not helped improve access**

The Department is not the only agency engaged with achieving outcomes for young people, as multiple agencies have responsibilities. In 2009, Government established an agreement to provide priority access to services for children and young people in care and eligible care leavers up to 25 years of age to improve their life outcomes.

Government more broadly has not achieved its intended aim of seamless support and priority access to services for care leavers. Despite the vulnerability and complexity of needs these young people are queued with everyone else or in some cases are denied access due to not completing appropriate paper work before they leave care. Service providers advised that they were unable to assist eligible young people to get public housing because applications had not been completed on time. For example:

- one provider reported to the Department that 70% of young people turning 18 referred to its service had not been placed on a housing waitlist
- another also reported that 3 young people were deemed ineligible to access the Housing priority waitlist because a referral had not been made prior to leaving care.

There are many reasons why a young person may not ultimately access public housing. However, in the cases above, the young people were denied public housing as an option of last resort because their applications were not submitted prior to leaving care.

Government announced structural changes to the Department in July 2017. This resulted in the joining up of housing, disability, child protection and youth justice services. These changes provide a good opportunity for the Department to better coordinate these services. However, this does not include links to education or health needs especially mental health. So additional effort to effectively work across organisational boundaries is required for these areas.



## Communication between the district offices and service providers could be improved

A lack of information exchange between district offices and service providers can affect whether a young person accesses support. We found that service expectations were not always clear nor was information effectively shared to improve the outcomes for young people.

For example, referrals often missed key information such as the young person's history, living arrangements at the time and support needs. This is contrary to the Department's guidance which requires its staff to discuss the referral with service providers and provide detailed and current information. Other areas of concern included:

- lack of clarity on roles and expectation of what each should and can deliver. This manifested in late referral of complex cases that resulted in the need for crisis management
- poor engagement from the Department and late or no responses to emails and telephone calls.

Examples of good practice exist. In one region, the leaving care provider and district office have established a memorandum of understanding. The chief executive of the not for profit advised that this had greatly improved the working relationship and made it easy to escalate issues if required. The purpose of the agreement is to improve and support liaison and communication between the 2 parties to improve outcomes for young people.

## The Department lacks key information to monitor and improve support for young people

The Department does not adequately monitor the performance of the providers by measuring outcomes achieved for young people after 18. Providers are required to report back to the Department on a 6 monthly basis on:

- number of activities, camps or events delivered
- number and percentage of referrals to accommodation services
- number of clients assisted to find accommodation
- number and percentage of referrals to other support services.

Providers are not required to report on whether the services that the young person needed were delivered or on outcomes relating to employment, education and housing. They do collect one proxy measure of outcomes which is '*the number of young people who report that they have improved life skills*'. This measure is not sufficient to adequately determine how well support services are provided or whether the young person's needs were adequately met.

The Department has limited information on outcomes for care leavers because it routinely closes case files when care leavers turn 18. This means that any update to a young person's identified need and whether they have been met can only occur if they seek assistance from the Department up to the age of 25. The Department relies on providers to support and monitor those that have been referred to them. However, not all young people access or remain in contact with the services. Under current arrangements service providers are not required to provide identified information on an individual young person to the Department. This means that they no longer have up to date information on whether the young person's identified needs have been met.

To better understand the outcomes of young people leaving care, the Department commissioned a report in January 2016. The report found that those with a care experience had worse outcomes in most areas (physical, mental health, high school education, mortality, corrective services). This was compared to young people with similar demographics but had not been in the care of the Department. The children in this study were in care for varying lengths of time and the report did not examine the effect of different care experiences on outcomes. The report does not help the Department to understand whether its contracted service providers are effective.



## Appendix 1: Leaving care support funding for 2014-15 to 2016-17

Funding description	Budget (\$)	Actual (\$)	Percentage difference (%)
NGO's funded to deliver Leaving care service	2,000,631	1,977,090	(1)
NPA HSW Young Women Leaving Care	215,979	215,978	0
Leaving care – financial support	893,604	693,018	(22)
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,110,214</b>	<b>2,886, 086</b>	<b>(7)</b>

Source: OAG analysis of Department of Communities information

**Table 1: Leaving care funding 2016-17**

Funding description	Budget (\$)	Actual (\$)	Percentage difference (%)
NGO's funded to deliver Leaving care service	1,971,487	1,940,958	(2)
NPA HSW Young Women Leaving Care	204,111	204,113	0
Leaving care – financial support	873,000	532,772	(39)
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,048,598</b>	<b>2,677,843</b>	<b>(12)</b>

Source: OAG analysis of Department of Communities information

**Table 2: Leaving care funding 2015-16**

Funding description	Budget (\$)	Actual (\$)	Percentage difference (%)
NGO's funded to deliver Leaving care service	1,897,525	1,837,291	(3)
NPA HSW Young Women Leaving Care	198,744	198,589	0
Leaving care – financial support	903,882	713,558	(21)
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,000,151</b>	<b>2,749,438</b>	<b>(8)</b>

Source: OAG analysis of Department of Communities information

**Table 3: Leaving care funding 2014-15**

## Appendix 2: Description of main support provided in July to December 2017 reporting period

Type of support	Percentage of young people provided with support	Number of young people with the identified need
Family relationship	95%	162
Recreational activities	93%	120
Assisted to undertake education	92%	168
Financial information and advice	92%	166
Assisted to find employment	91%	148
Obtain/maintain government allowance	88%	152
Assisted to undertake training	85%	86
Assisted to sustain tenancy	84%	116
Assisted to find short-term accommodation	83%	111
Legal information and advice	83%	141
Disability services	83%	66
Assisted to find long-term accommodation	79%	175
Mental health services	75%	85
Health/medical services	71%	129
Specialist counselling services	68%	78
Counselling (informal) <sup>1</sup>	106%	264

Source: OAG analysis of Department of Communities information

<sup>2</sup>July to December 2017 reporting period.

<sup>1</sup> Reported as occasions of service/number of activity and not by individual client.

<sup>2</sup> Multiple visits from the same young person over multiple reporting periods prevented summing visits across more than one period at a time, however this result was broadly reflective of the pattern across other periods too. (Source: Leaving care provider report)

## Auditor General's reports

Report number	2018-19 reports	Date tabled
1	Information Systems Audit Report 2018	21 August 2018
Report number	2018 reports	Date tabled
13	Management of Crown Land Site Contamination	27 June 2018
12	Timely Payment of Suppliers	13 June 2018
11	WA Schools Public Private Partnership Project	13 June 2018
10	Opinions on Ministerial Notifications	24 May 2018
9	Management of the State Art Collection	17 May 2018
8	Management of Salinity	16 May 2018
7	Controls Over Corporate Credit Cards	8 May 2018
6	Audit Results Report – Annual 2017 Financial Audits and Management of Contract Extensions and Variations	8 May 2018
5	Confiscation of the Proceeds of Crime	3 May 2018
4	Opinions on Ministerial Notifications	11 April 2018
3	Opinion on Ministerial Notification	21 March 2018
2	Agency Gift Registers	15 March 2018
1	Opinions on Ministerial Notifications	22 February 2018



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