

Young People Leaving Care

Executive summary

Report 2: August 2018-19

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.

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.