



Response to Out-of-Home Care Strategic Directions in Western Australia 2015-2020 Discussion Paper

Background

The Department for Child Protection and Family Support (Department) released the *Out-of-Home Care Strategic Directions in Western Australia 2015-2020 Discussion Paper* (the discussion paper) for public consultation from 3 December 2014 to 13 February 2015. The discussion paper proposed a strategic platform to further advance and strengthen the Western Australian out-of-home care system.

Forty-six (46) written submissions were received during the consultation period from a range of government and community services sector organisations, inter-agency committees and individuals.

Further to these submissions, a series of targeted consultation forums were also undertaken with some Aboriginal stakeholders and consumers of the out-of-home care system.

Summary of feedback

Consultation indicated general support for the following key themes:

- The five strategic directions underpinning the strategic plan.
- Elevating and prioritising stability and certainty for children.
- Implementing a consistent mechanism to identify a child's level of complexity and support needs.
- Implementing a continuum care model where a component of care arrangement resourcing varies depending on the assessed complexity of a child.
- Implementing an Outcomes Framework for Children in Out-of-Home Care in Western Australia to measure and inform the out-of-home care system.
- Improving the support provided to relative care arrangements.
- Increasing external oversight of the out-of-home care system.
- Improving the implementation of the Rapid Response Framework.
- Strategically growing the role of Aboriginal community controlled organisations in the provision of out-of-home care.

The following key themes were generally not supported:

- Implementation of strategies beginning July 2015.
- Area-based organisation of services in the metropolitan area.
- A sector-wide mechanism for matching children with carers. The community services sector indicated preference to retain internal systems of matching child with carer.

The following key themes received mixed responses:

- Transitioning the community services sector to becoming the predominant provider of non-relative care.
- Retaining the provision of relative care by the Department.
- The implementation of permanency planning in reference to Aboriginal children.

A central theme of feedback running through many submissions was the need to increase the system's capacity to prevent children entering care, and where possible, to provide timely reunification work. It was suggested that this should be an additional strategic direction.

Strategic directions

Safety, certainty and stability for children - with a particular emphasis on Aboriginal children - will remain the core focus sitting above all others in the out-of-home care system. All reforms, strategies and realignments will be guided by affirming and reinforcing the Department's Permanency Planning Policy. This will encompass and encapsulate the prevention, timely reunification and out-of-home care stability work raised through the submission process.

The Department will adopt the proposed five strategic directions to underpin the focus of the future out-of-home care system in Western Australia. These broad directions will further align and guide strategies and actions over the next five years:

1. An out-of-home care system that is driven by the needs of the child.
2. An out-of-home care system that values and promotes stability for children in care.
3. A responsive and sustainable out-of-home care system with capacity.
4. An out-of-home care system that is accountable.
5. An out-of-home care system that is consistent.

An out-of-home care system that is driven by the needs of the child

The Department intends to move towards adopting and transitioning to a continuum care and funding model for all children in out-of-home care.

An essential aspect of a continuum care model is the ability to consistently, accurately, and efficiently identify the complexity of a child's need. The Department will employ a complexity assessment tool, grounded in the Western Australian context, to identify the needs of children as they enter care, as well as periodically thereafter.

In the model, every care arrangement will receive a foundation resource that will be linked to the cost of raising a child in out-of-home care in Western Australia. This will include what is currently known as subsidy and case support costs. The complexity assessment tool will be used to provide additional resources to the care arrangement based on the child's identified more complex needs.

To assist in determining the appropriate and adequate resources, the Department will utilise a comprehensive external costing exercise of the cost of raising a child in out-of-home care in Western Australia in 2015.

To develop a continuum care model focused on the needs of the child, the Department will incrementally transition away from standalone program funding towards a single integrated system of funding out-of-home care.

An out-of-home care system that values and promotes stability for children in care

All reforms and strategies will affirm and support the implementation of the Department's Permanency Planning Policy.

The Department will identify and implement a series of resource, process and workforce realignments to support an increase in stability and certainty for children. This will include an increased focus on preventative and reunification work; employing strategies to better support and sustain relative and non-relative (Department provided) care arrangements; and implementing systematic mechanisms to support children, where appropriate, into permanent arrangements out of care. Whilst not all these strategies have been in scope for the discussion paper, they are part of a broader reform program for the Department that will align with strategies proposed in the discussion paper.

An important aspect of this will be increasing the alignment of funded community services sector programs to support the Department's Permanency Planning Policy. Initially this will take the form of a full review of funded services, with a focus on how they promote stability and certainty for children and families. A review of contracting of out-of-home care arrangements will also occur, to strengthen accountability and expectations regarding stability and certainty for children in out-of-home care.

Further strategies affecting the whole out-of-home care sector will include:

- Repositioning the out-of-home care system in its standing and interface with the community to improve the implementation of the Permanency Planning Policy
- Identifying and implementing carer recruitment, training and support strategies that reinforce stability and certainty for children.
- Continuing to move towards carers having greater responsibility and decision-making for expenditure for children in their care.
- Reviewing the purpose and use of respite in the out-of-home care system.
- Exploring opportunities for increased use of carer adoption.
- Exploring opportunities for local adoption to be facilitated by the community services sector.

A responsive and sustainable out-of-home care system with capacity

The Department will continue to provide relative care arrangements.

In principle, the Department retains the direction of increasing the proportion of non-relative care arrangements provided by the community services sector. In concert with the Department, the community services sector can bring a sustained focus on children in out-of-home care. The rate and gross increase of care arrangements being provided by the community services sector will be influenced in part by the resources available.

To support growth in the community services sector, the Department will seek opportunities to further engage organisations with no or limited recurrent funding "footprints" in Western Australia. Linked to this, the Department will strategically support the use of Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs), with an initial preference for partnerships between established out-of-home care providers and ACCOs.

The Department will abandon the proposal to organise the provision of funding into geographical regions in the metropolitan area; however it will proceed with organising procurement of services aligned to geographical areas in the country.

Linked to strategic direction two, the Department will also seek to broaden the role and capacity of the community services sector, including an expectation for organisations to:

- provide stable care for children as they enter out-of-home care;
- provide care for a broader spectrum of child complexity;

- better sustain care arrangements for children in challenging times; and
- demonstrate cultural competency of care provision.

As prefaced above, funding levels for care arrangements will be reviewed. The resources currently known as 'subsidy', 'case support costs' and resultant 'unit costs' will be revised and linked to an external costing exercise based on the cost of raising a child in out-of-home care in Western Australia. It is envisaged that additional costs based on the child's needs and complexity, as well as moving away from standalone program funding, will support greater flexibility and innovation in the out-of-home care sector.

To complement these funding realignments, the Department will update the way it contracts with the community services sector, including an increased focus on payment for actual services provided.

Opportunities for innovation using mechanisms such as delegated case management, social-impact bonds and outcomes-based contracting will be considered and communicated through the Out-of-Home Care Reform Plan.

An out-of-home care system that is accountable

The Department will develop and implement an *Outcomes Framework for Children in Out-of-Home Care in Western Australia* (outcomes framework). This outcomes framework will focus and increase the accountability of the entire out-of-home care sector on the outcomes achieved for children in out-of-home care. As a dual benefit, the information received through this process will steer continuous improvement in the broader out-of-home care system.

Informed by the outcomes framework, the Department will intensify its work with government partners to commit to and implement the *Rapid Response Framework*.

The Government recognises that the current, largely internal regulatory oversight raises perceptions of a lack of rigour and conflicts-of-interest. The Government is committed to addressing this and will seek to increase external oversight of the out-of-home care system. This may take the form of an external accreditation system.

To complement this work, the Department will work with the community services sector to review and update the *Better Care, Better Services Framework*, with a central focus of further aligning the standards framework with the *National Standards for Out-of-Home Care*.

An out-of-home care system that is consistent

The lens of consistency will be continually applied across the out-of-home care system to better support a system that provides safety, certainty and stability for all children.

It is apparent that inconsistency in carer standards has occurred as the system has evolved. The Department will provide greater clarity over out-of-home care models that are viewed as foster care, and implement a more consistent sector-wide method of assessing, approving and training foster carers.

Next steps

The Department will broaden the scope of the OOHC Strategic Plan to incorporate internal reforms, strategies and alignments to increase stability and certainty for children and families. To reflect this, the project will be renamed *Out-of-Home Care Reform*, with the key deliverable being the *Out-of-Home Care Reform Plan*.

The Department will continue to engage with the community services sector, utilising this valuable knowledge and skill-base as needed. Complementing this knowledge sharing, the Department will continue to utilise the Community Sector Roundtable as the primary communication forum.

In line with submissions to the discussion paper that indicated concern about the short timeframe for implementation, the Department will extend the development period of the Out-of-Home Care Reform Plan. A launch, followed by a staged, incremental implementation will occur from January 2016.