

Feedback on the Department for Child Protection Child and Youth Engagement Strategy 2021-2023

June 2021



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Re: Department for Child Protection Child and Youth Engagement Strategy 2021-2023

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department for Child Protection's Child and Youth Engagement Strategy 2021-2023 (the Strategy).

I commend the development of the Strategy, and the commitment to involve young people in care or with care experience in the development of the Strategy. This recognises that the most effective system and services are those that are informed by the people who are affected by them.

I also welcome the Strategy's commitment to strengthen partnerships with service providers, oversight bodies and other agencies, including the CREATE Foundation. Such partnerships will be key to the Strategy's potential to translate into real action and positive change in the lives of children and young people.

There is scope for the final Strategy to be more consistently child-focused, have a clearer purpose and ultimately result in better outcomes for both children and young people and the Department. Following on from our recent discussion, I make the following specific recommendations to guide the final Strategy's development and implementation:

1. **That the final Strategy outlines the scope of decision-making available to children and young people in care, is more consistently child-focused, and outlines who in the Department is responsible for each action.**
2. **That the final Strategy commits to engaging with younger children (aged 12 years and younger) in addition to the engagement with older young people.**
3. **That the final Strategy ensures children and young people in care are able to participate in decision-making in a wide range of ways that suit them and are appropriately supported by trusted staff and sufficiently informed to be able to participate.**
4. **That the final Strategy promotes greater transparency and accountability, including through timelines for the Strategy's actions and mechanisms for the Department to monitor and report on progress against each action.**

I hope this feedback is useful to the Department. If you would like to discuss anything further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People
Adelaide, South Australia

1. That the final Strategy outlines the scope of decision-making available to children and young people in care, is more consistently child-focused, and outlines who in the Department is responsible for each action.

It is important that the final Strategy is clear about what level of choice, influence and agency is available to children and young people in their interactions with the Department and outline the limits to the decisions children and young people can make.

Where children and young people understand the parameters of their participation, their expectations are more likely to be met. This is essential to building trust and supporting children and young people to feel positive about themselves and the systems around them, now and in the future.

This is particularly important if a decision has already been made, or if children and young people's participation can only change something small. In these cases, children and young people should be provided with an explanation for such decisions so they can still understand and feel valued in the absence of direct participation.

Building on the draft Strategy's broad reference to opportunities for children and young people to 'provide their views on relevant DCP policies, projects and programs', the final Strategy could outline the kinds of decisions to which it relates and on which children and young people will be engaged.

There is potential for the final Strategy to map out what level of voice, choice, influence and agency children and young people will have in decision-making at each stage of their contact with the child protection system, from court decisions to decisions around placements, contact arrangements, education and annual reviews, as well as leaving care and transitioning to adulthood.

While the draft Strategy commits to 'increasing children and young people's awareness and access to information when transitioning from care', it would also be beneficial to mention whether or how children and young people will have a say in planning and decision-making regarding their transition from care.

A lack of knowledge and support regarding 'adulting stuff' – how to do your taxes, open a bank account, get your drivers' license or enrol to vote, for example – is consistently raised as an issue by all young people. For children and young people in care, the barriers to this knowledge and support are compounded.

CREATE Foundation's recent report, *Transitioning to Adulthood from Out-of-Home Care*, highlighted that only 36% of respondents had a transition plan for leaving care. Of those with a plan, only 39% had participated in the plan.ⁱ The survey also found that the majority of young people who had a care experience (70%) were not consulted about changes to their placement while they were in care.

It would also be useful for the final Strategy to outline how children and young people will be engaged and feel heard in day to day decisions. Children and young people's engagement in this 'everyday' decision making warrants as much attention as systemic and longer-term decision making.

Finally, although the use of “we” throughout the Strategy refers to the Department, it is unclear which part of the Department will have responsibility for each action and how this will be supported. I recommend that the final Strategy clarifies this to ensure transparency.

2. That the final Strategy commits to engaging with younger children (aged 12 years and younger) in addition to the engagement with older young people.

It is great that the draft Strategy was informed by young people with care experience who were aged 13 years old and older. It is also important that the Department actively supports younger children (aged 12 years old and younger) to have a voice, choice, influence and agency.

Children and young people’s experiences, opinions and needs vary significantly as they get older. An 18-year-old reflecting on their experiences when they were an 8-year-old ten years ago are not going to be the same as the experiences of an 8-year-old today. As such, the voices of older young people should not be assumed to represent or reflect those of younger children.

Each year, I send out thousands of postcards to 8 to 12 year olds in schools around South Australia. My postcards project is a child focused way of connecting with a group of children whose voices are rarely heard. The [Things that Matter](#) reports are released annually, and capture what younger children wrote on their postcards about what is important to them, what they are worried about, and their aspirations for their own futures and for change in their communities.ⁱⁱ

The Department may find this work helpful, not only for the insights it provides into the lives of 8-12 year olds in South Australia (including those in care), but also as a practical guide for the Department’s own efforts to engage with children and young people of all ages.

3. That the final Strategy ensures children and young people in care are able to participate in decision-making in a wide range of ways that suit them, and are appropriately supported by trusted staff and sufficiently informed to be able to participate.

In order to maximise engagement, it is important that the Department considers how decision-making opportunities can work around the reality of children and young people’s busy and complex lives.

For example, many children and young people may not have the time or capacity to be part of a group such as the Young Persons Group or the other ‘diverse and inclusive groups’ mentioned in the Strategy.

If these proposed groups are being established as one of the primary platforms through which children and young people in care will engage with the Department, there is a risk that this could lead to a model whereby only a select few (most likely the least marginalised of the marginalised) will be engaged and have a voice.

I recommend that the Department put in place mechanisms for the ‘groups’ and any other ‘tools’ or ‘processes’ to have influence. This might look like expanding on the proposed ‘quality audits to help us understand how children and young people are involved in decisions that impact them’ to audit how the Department is responding to and acting on what children and young people have said through this involvement.

It is important for there to be a range of ways for children and young people to participate in ways that uphold their rights and suit their individual needs. As significant adults in the lives of children and young people, we all need to engage with children and young people as citizens, and value them for more than their adversity or trauma.

This office is of the view that there is no need for the Department to ‘create technology’ that enables children and young people to share their views. Rather, these resources would be better invested in supporting positive relationships and greater trust between children and young people and the adults working across the child protection system.

This means ensuring workers and carers have respect for children and young people and are equipped with skills and knowledge to create kind and welcoming environments, and ensure that children and young people’s experiences are consistently as positive as possible rather than dependent on the capacity or goodwill of individual case workers.

Rather than creating an ‘intranet page’ for DCP staff to navigate on their own, there should be greater consistency in the quality of training, professional development and ongoing support available to staff. It is essential that all of these actions give special consideration to the rights of children and young people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and children and young people in care who are also in contact with the youth justice system.

Being able to participate and engage effectively also requires a level of appropriate information. This means being informed as soon as possible about administrative or legal decisions made about them, the reasons for such decisions and any appeal mechanisms available to them.

Rather than creating a new website or ‘technology’ for children and young people in care to access information or have a say, there should be child-friendly and age-appropriate information and opportunities to have a say embedded into children and young people’s experiences at each stage of the system and in all areas of their lives, such as education and employment. I would be happy to discuss models of engagement further with the Department.

4. That the final Strategy promotes greater transparency and accountability, including through timelines for the Strategy’s actions and mechanisms to monitor and report on progress against each action.

It would be useful for the final Strategy to establish any mechanisms for the Department to monitor the implementation of the Strategy.

In order to maximise the Strategy's potential to lead to positive outcomes, I recommend that the final Strategy includes timelines for each of the Strategy's proposed actions as well as a commitment to monitor, measure and report on the Department's progress against each of the Strategy's goals and actions.

Alongside clearly identifying who in the Department is responsible for implementing each part of the Strategy (see Recommendation 1), these actions will promote great transparency and accountability, and lead to better outcomes.

ⁱ CREATE Foundation, 2020. *Transitioning to Adulthood from Out-of-Home Care: Independence or Interdependence?* Available at <https://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CREATE-Post-Care-Report-2021-LR.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Connolly, H. Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia (2020). *The Things that Matter: Views of 8-12 year olds on life, school and community*. Available at <https://www.ccyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Screen-The-Things-That-Matter-Report.pdf>.