



# ACT Youth Roundtable – for young people in care

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November 2018 Final Report

*Children and young  
people in care –  
growing up strong,  
safe and connected*

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## **Acknowledgement of Country**

The ACT Government acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the Canberra region and that the region is also an important meeting place and is significant to other Aboriginal groups. The ACT Government respects the continuing culture and the contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to the life of this city and surrounding region.

## Executive summary

*A Step Up for Our Kids (A Step Up)* is the ACT Government's Out of Home Care Strategy that sets out the provision of out of home care services to children and young people at risk of coming into care or who are in care. *A Step Up* aims to improve outcomes for children and young people in care by providing flexible, child focused services that are based around a therapeutic, trauma-informed response. It places a strong emphasis on preventing children and young people from entering care and moving them into permanent families when they can't return home.

The vision for *A Step Up* is – *Children and young people in care – growing up strong, safe and connected.*

A key component of *A Step Up* is to consider ways to empower children and young people to be involved in individual case decisions and more broadly across policy and practice development.

On 24 November 2018, the Community Services Directorate (CSD) organised a Youth Roundtable for young people in out of home care and young people who have had involvement in out of home care. A Roundtable is a valuable method for understanding people's experiences. The views in this report, also reiterate findings of larger scale research projects.

The topic for the Roundtable was – *What has been your experience of case planning?*

The event was co-facilitated by the CREATE Foundation and the Youth Coalition, with additional assistance from the Australian Catholic University, Institute of Child Protection Studies.

The main points young people said they wanted considered in policy and practice development included:

- to have greater involvement and participation in decision making
- to understand why decisions were made
- time to process and consider feedback and questions
- to be provided with multiple opportunities to consider information
- greater access to information
- to be involved in policy development
- more frequent and direct access with case managers
- case managers to be powerful advocates
- for caseworkers to act with empathy and be trained in matters that impact young people such as mental health
- to be matched with their case manager and to have continuity with the same case manager.

A short summary of the main findings was sent to all young people in care or who have had a care experience in December 2019 ([Appendix A](#)).

This report sets out the full findings from the Roundtable and includes the next steps including how CSD will consider the findings, how to provide feedback to young people and how the findings from the Roundtable are consistent with national and international research.

Some of the next steps include investigating ways of setting up regular forums for young people to have a voice in policy and practice development and how we can use this information in some of the projects underway.

## The voice of a young person

With permission, one young person was happy for their words to be included in this report -

*This system is so currently absurd, that I feel I can't adequately convey just how angry the things I've heard this morning have made me feel.*

*The same problems are still endemic. A lack of empathy, a lack of proper mental health training, and a near constant lack of continuity in case workers. I know most of the people in Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS), and in the system broadly, want to make a difference.*

*But I've been a member of CREATE for nearly a decade. I've spoken in the Legislative Assembly, met with Ministers and Shadow Ministers. All kinds of people in the industry and in positions of decision making authority. And I am still yet to see any change. It saddens me, incredibly deeply, that I still meet people at these events who are still in the same boat that I was, and often worse.*

*We need workers with empathy. Those who weren't born into a bath of lukewarm water with no life experience or emotional intelligence. We need workers with proper mental health training. We need continuity, with those workers.*

*I am pleading. As young people who have been given the short end of the stick for years, we are exhausted. I am tired. Please. Actually do something useful with this information. Otherwise why does CREATE exist? Why did any of us choose to be here today? Please. Don't let your attendance at this event rest as purely a token gesture"*

## Findings

The detailed findings from the Youth Roundtable include:

### Involvement in decision making

The overwhelming response from young people present at the Roundtable was the desire to be given a choice to be involved in decisions and to understand what was happening in their lives and why. Many young people present on the day were able to recognise times in their lives when they felt, in retrospect, they were not well placed to make good decisions for their own future. However, they wanted to be asked if they wanted to participate in decision making and to understand the outcomes.

Every young person present on the day was able to identify times in their lives when they felt important decisions had been made without their involvement. Most young people shared stories of confusion, hurt, distress and frustration caused when they felt they hadn't been consulted, or where the reasons for key decisions hadn't been properly explained.

The young people present wanted their case managers and those involved in decisions about their lives to take the time to talk to them, ask them for their perspectives, show empathy and 'actually listen' to their responses. 'Actually listening' involved more than nodding and smiling in the right places, but actively seeking to understand what is important.

Some young people present also wanted workers to recognise that they may need time to think before being able to give an answer about their views on a decision. They talked about finding it difficult to articulate their perspective in a single meeting, particularly if they had just received significant or distressing information. Young people expressed a need for case managers to provide multiple opportunities to discuss their thoughts and feelings and for case managers to include these opportunities in their timelines for case planning and not rush processes.

Some young people present identified that when they receive sensitive information, their first reaction may not be rational and to let them have some time and space to process what is being discussed. Their first reaction shouldn't be the only reaction taken into consideration, and as identified above some young people need multiple opportunities to respond.

Some young people present identified that different ways of communicating was also useful. Some young people liked the idea of being able to attend and be involved in everything including big case conferences, going to Court and contact visits, whilst others preferred other people making the decision. Most recognised this was a personal decision.

One young person highlighted a positive experience in a Family Group Conference when everyone came for a group meeting and they felt listened to and heard.

Another young person identified how sometimes a case manager might make a decision in response to a young person acting in a certain way, without attempting to understand the context and the 'why' the young person acted the way they did. The young person may have been upset or acting out because of something that happened and this behaviour was a one-off or could be explained and understood.

## Feedback about decisions

When decisions are made, whether they differ to a young person's wishes or are the same, those present emphasised the importance of case managers promptly getting back in contact to explain what was happening and why a decision had been made. Those present at the Roundtable would prefer to hear back in a timely manner, and waiting weeks to receive a response is too long. Even if a case manager can't provide a final answer they should still get in touch with the young person and let them know what is happening at regular intervals.

Some young people identified that if they don't understand why a decision was made, it may mean that they make up a narrative themselves. This narrative often puts themselves in the blame, as they grapple with understanding why something may have happened.

Some young people present would also prefer to know when something is or isn't happening, for instance if their birth parent doesn't come for contact but was meant to, they would rather know about the contact and why it didn't go ahead, even if this upsets them at the time, and agreed that honesty is more important.

## Case manager relationships

Young people present at the Roundtable recognised the important role case managers play in the lives of children and young people in out of home care. They wanted case managers to be powerful advocates, like 'bulldogs', who fight for what is best for them.

The young people present wanted case managers who:

- act with empathy and have compassion
- who understand mental health issues
- are willing to be flexible and creative in case planning and management.

One young person gave an example of where a case manager was a strong advocate and fought for what was best for the young person. They could see how this led to an incredible outcome for the young person.

Another young person talked about how they felt some case managers often focused on the negative, and didn't acknowledge the positives, noting that even small victories are still victories. Also, it is often the case that what others might think of as little achievements, may actually be massive for young people in care and these should be celebrated.

Those present wanted to have the option of more frequent contact, and direct access to their case manager independent of anyone else in their lives. They wanted the contact to be meaningful, for them to get to know each other and to possibly accompany them to places they needed to go.

Some young people wanted it to be really clear that they can have contact with their case manager without their carer or residential worker present. Young people present on the day knew they have a right to contact their case manager directly and wanted it to be clearly explained how they should go about this.

A number of young people also highlighted the importance of 'matching' case managers and young people to ensure a good fit, or giving young people some say in choosing a new case manager if the partnership isn't working. A young person used the example that a person would continue to look for a counsellor to ensure they suited their needs.

Some young people present identified the impact a high turnover of case managers can have on building and maintaining relationships, and that this often means the young person has to tell their story multiple times or has to ask again for things they might want or need.

A final parting comment from another young person was to ask case managers to *'hug the kids you work with'*.

### What makes a good case manager?

Young people were asked to brainstorm what makes a good case manager and they came up with:

- easy to talk to
- empathetic and compassionate
- supportive around mental health issues
- frequent contact with the ability to have contact out of hours if needed
- involves the young person in decision making
- gets back to them promptly
- listens to ideas
- flexible
- remember they are working with real children and young people
- warm and affectionate
- understanding
- doesn't ignore things
- two-way conversation
- have meetings and connect with them
- help young people to understand information
- don't always take the foster carer's side
- pay attention to what they're doing in their job
- ensure carer assessment is robust.

### Access to information

Those young people present at the Roundtable wanted information about why they had come into care and recognised that their ability to understand what happened would change as they grew older. One young person present also felt case managers shouldn't assume that their ability to understand sensitive information is based solely on their age, as some seven year olds may be more capable of understanding sensitive information than others, and this is an individual situation.

Some young people present wanted access to their files or records prior to turning 18 years beyond what they might receive from their life story work.

### Involvement in policy development

Some young people present were interested in being involved in similar events to the Roundtable and wanted a place to be heard and share information with others. They were interested in being involved in policy and practice development.

Lots of young people present expressed appreciation of some of the existing services for young people in care such as CREATE but one young person expressed a concern about who they spoke to at events like Roundtables and asked that the government not always partner with the same agencies and mix things up.

## Consistency of findings with other research

A significant body of research exists, both nationally and internationally, regarding the participation of children and young people in child protection systems. Findings from this previous research is consistent with the key themes expressed by young people participating in the Youth Roundtable. It should also be noted that there are numerous pieces of research, referred to below, in which children and young people have offered clear recommendations and ways forward to address some of the themes listed below.

### Greater involvement and participation in decision making

The expressed desire by young people in the out of home care system to be involved and heard in decisions which affect their lives, has been well documented in Australian and international research since the adoption of principles of participation articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) within child protection legislation (McDowall, 2013). The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has again highlighted the importance of consulting directly with children and young people and of listening to, accepting, and responding to their points of view.

Literature in this area also provides an understanding of the barriers and enablers to participation, as well as a number of useful definitions, models and principles for participation (McDowall, 2016). The wishes expressed by young people taking part in the Roundtable align with the definition of 'active participation' as offered by Sinclair.

Active participation should refer to situations where there is empowerment of those involved—that children believe, and have reason to believe, that their involvement will make a difference (2004, p. 111).

Despite the articulated benefits of active participation by children and young people in child protection systems, and a range of tools and resources designed to embed principles for participation into practice, research informs us that young people and children in out of home care can feel excluded or not consistently consulted, and that their views, if they had an opportunity to express them, were not acted upon (Cashmore, 2002; McDowall, 2013).

Many young people want to be involved in decisions in their lives, and this is particularly the case for placement choices, placement changes, court processes, schooling, and contact with birth family and other significant people in their lives.

There are a number of key words which are consistently used by children and young people in the research when asked about their experiences and wishes in relation to 'having a say'—listen, respect, being heard, being taken seriously, do something – respond (McDowall, 2013).

### Time to process and consider

Young people have previously highlighted that they need to be provided with information in the 'right way' and at the 'right time' to be able to actively participate in decisions in their lives. They have emphasised that this needs to happen in timeframes which work for them and where they are 'at' – not 'the system's' timeframes (The Who Cares? Trust, 2013). Young people's needs and wishes for workers to communicate with them often and clearly, to provide information on multiple occasions and in a variety of ways, and to ensure understanding, is also consistent with existing literature, trauma-informed practice and child-centred principles (Winkworth & McArthur, 2006).

The issues highlighted by young people at the Roundtable are consistent with views captured in past research. Young people have highlighted that for participation to be meaningful, 'workers' needed to not only listen, but also take their views into consideration, and where possible, act on them (Moore, Bennett & McArthur, 2007). Providing young people with feedback about how their views and wishes have been considered and acted upon, or not, is equally important. Young people not only want to be listened to and taken seriously; they also want to feel that their input has made a difference (The Who Cares? Trust, 2013).

Research has also highlighted young people's concerns around the effort it takes for them to participate in such processes, and the resulting anger and frustration when their opinions have been sought, and then ignored. A sentiment expressed in the Roundtable discussions was that possible 'tokenistic' consultation, can lead to young people feeling undervalued and disengaging with 'the system', and is a barrier to future participation (Moore et al., 2007). Young people have expressed that they know they cannot always get what they ask for, however, it is important for the reasons behind decisions and actions to be explained to them in a way they understand, as soon as decisions are made, and for there to be time for them to ask as many questions as needed (Victorian Government, 2016).

### Greater access to information

Young people have consistently raised the need to be provided with information about their lives and child protection processes. When young people enter the care system, they are not always given basic information about why or what might happen in the future, and that this often leaves them feeling anxious, powerless and afraid (Moore et al., 2007). This extends to the need for answers to young people's queries, particularly the 'whys'. Common areas that are consistently highlighted, are reasons for entry into care, rationale for placement decisions/changes and for visits with birth family (Moore et al., 2007). For many, the lack of information related to their 'life story' continued through their care experience, leaving young people to try and answer the 'whys' themselves. Evidence also tells us that without correct information, children and young people will often blame themselves for these occurrences (CREATE Foundation, 2005).

### To be involved in policy development (active participation at a systems level)

At the Roundtable, some participants also talked about the desire for their experiences, views and feedback to have an impact, not only in their own lives and care-planning, but to also affect positive change for other children and young people in out of home care. Many young people in care have also wanted to have a say on other social issues, such as community services and public housing (Bessell, 2011). Similarly, some young adults who had experienced violence (including young people placed in out of home care), felt their lived experiences of abuse meant they had valuable input to informing the development of services designed to assist them (Horwath, Kalyva & Spyru, 2012). These sentiments are not new, with feedback from many children and young people showing a continued demand to be active participants in the care they receive, and on a broader level, to have a say in the systems designed to protect and support them (G-Force, 2015).

### Relationships with case managers/caseworkers

Trusting, positive relationships are recognised as a cornerstone of successful trauma-informed care, and are essential to enabling active participation by children and young people (Brown, King & Wissow, 2017). It is also noted that children and young people need to feel safe to articulate their thoughts, particularly if they wish to raise a concern (Moore, McArthur, Noble-

Carr & Harcourt, 2015). Positive examples provided by children and young people of being heard and involved in decision-making most often feature positive caseworker experiences (McDowall, 2013).

Children and young people have described 'good' caseworkers as those who show they 'really care', provide support, are persistent and look out for them, advocate for them, get back to them, answer questions honestly and are good listeners (Victorian Government, 2016). Children and young people, particularly those in residential care settings, recognise the important role caseworkers have in their lives, and are keen to connect with their caseworkers (ACT Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner, 2018).

Children and young people have talked about wanting caseworker relationships which are consistent and continuous, expressing frustration around high staff-turnover (The Who Cares? Trust, 2013). Children and young people want caseworkers to really get to know them, to listen to them carefully, have someone whom they trust and who has shown them that they will 'fight' for them (The Who Cares? Trust, 2013). Young people have also raised the need for caseworkers to receive training on how to work with young people (Moore et al., 2007).

### Case managers/caseworkers to be powerful advocates

The wish for case managers to be powerful advocates is consistent with the characteristics children and young people list for a 'good' caseworker (CREATE Foundation, 2015). Young people recommend workers take the time to help them understand what is happening and support them to voice their views in case planning meetings (The Who Cares? Trust, 2013). Young people knowing that their caseworkers will act as strong advocates for them has been raised as being of particular importance for children and young people who may not have had someone trust and believe them previously, and who may believe that they do not have anyone who will stand up for them (Testro, 2006).

### To be matched with their case manager/caseworker

Past focus groups with young people have raised the importance of being well matched to their caseworker (The Who Cares? Trust, 2013). The notion of 'matching' is also supported by the views articulated by children and young people (and caseworkers) in regard to the nature of the relationship they wish to form with their caseworker.

It is of interest to note that legislation in the United Kingdom provides statutory guidance in relation to considering young people's views when 'matching' them with a Personal Adviser (PA). PAs provide support to young people in/during their transition from care of "young people will have views about the kinds of qualities that they will expect from their PA and these should be taken into account when matching" (Department of Education, 2015, p. 25).

### Next steps

CSD is committed to providing young people with feedback about how we have listened, and what we are doing to act on what has been said. This feedback will be timely and ongoing as we aim to embed what we heard into our policy and practice to achieve long lasting change.

As a first step, CSD will be hosting a series of presentations on the findings with governance groups, child protection staff and executives to consider the feedback and policy implications. There are a number of significant projects either underway or about to commence where the feedback will be considered including:

- The design of a new client management system – CSD is about to launch a new IT system that will help to prioritise involving children and young people in decision

- making.
- Embedding therapeutic trauma-informed practice – CSD is developing a trauma-informed poster about the young people’s feedback from the roundtable and how it can be used in practice.
  - Updating the CSD website – CSD is developing specific webpages for children and young people in care. Much of the feedback from the Roundtable can be incorporated into developing pages that help children and young people understand the care system and offer suggestions on how to participate in decisions that affect their lives.
  - Refreshing the ACT’s Charter of rights for kids in care – CSD is currently refreshing the ACT’s Charter of rights and will consider how the feedback can be used to promote the rights of all children and young people in care.

CSD will also commit to ongoing participation and consultation with young people in out of home care and will continue to include the voices of young people in the development of policy and practice.

## Details about the Youth Roundtable

CSD is very grateful to the young people who attended on the day and to the carers and support workers who helped young people to participate. CSD would also like to thank the facilitators from the CREATE Foundation, Institute of Child Protection Studies and the Youth Coalition for their contribution to the event and for providing input into this report.

### The event

The Roundtable was held at the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre on Saturday, 24 November 2018. The facilitators and scribes for the day included Mr Rhys Thorpe and Mr Sebastian Trew, Institute of Child Protection Studies, Ms Susan Pellegrino and Mr Nicky Link, CREATE and Dr Justin Barker and Ms Erin Barry, Youth Coalition.

The facilitators developed guidance questions about the topic. There was also the ability for young people to guide the discussion and provide feedback about any parts of the out of home care system.

A total of 11 young people attended the Roundtable.

At the end of the Roundtable the Minister for Children, Youth and Families and a number of ACT Government and non-government executive staff attended a feedback session about the high-level findings from the event.

### Invitations

The following people were sent letters of invitation, or advising them about the Roundtable:

- young people aged 12-17 years who are currently in out of home care;
- young people who were now aged 18-21 years who had turned 18 years whilst in care; and
- the carers of young people aged 12-17 years who are currently in out of home care. The event was also advertised through CSD and other social media.

### Feedback

There was a commitment made to young people that CSD would provide a summary of the findings and next steps. Young people were sent a letter and summary document on 12 December 2018. The summary document is at [Appendix A](#).

# THE BIG THINGS WE HEARD

## 2018 YOUTH ROUNDTABLE



On 24 November 2018, a group of young people joined a Youth Roundtable to share their views and experiences about case planning and decision-making in out of home care.

Young people provided so much great feedback. It will be written up in a more detailed report so action can be taken by the ACT Government with the help of others including CREATE and the Youth Coalition. These are the big things we heard.

### Involvement in decision-making

Most young people present on the day agreed **case managers should hold the final responsibility for making important decisions**. Many were able to recognise times when they felt they were not well placed to make good decisions for their own future. Despite this, everyone emphasised the importance of ensuring they had **opportunities to be involved in decisions** and understand what was happening in their lives and why.

Every young person present was able to identify times in their lives when they felt important decisions had been made without their involvement. Most young people shared stories of confusion, hurt, distress and frustration when they felt they hadn't been consulted, or where the reasons for key decisions had not been properly explained.

The young people wanted those involved in making decisions about their lives to take the time to talk to them, **ask them for their perspectives and 'actually listen'** to their responses. 'Actually listening' involved more than nodding and smiling, but actively seeking to understand what is important.

The young people also wanted workers to recognise they may need time to think when considering big decisions. They talked about finding it difficult to talk in a single meeting, particularly if they had just received upsetting information. Young people wanted case managers to **provide multiple opportunities to discuss their thoughts and feelings**.

Also, where decisions need to be made that go against a child or young person's wishes, those present emphasised the importance of **workers promptly getting back in contact** with them to explain what has happened and why.

listen  
advocate care

### Case manager relationships

Young people present recognised the important role case managers play in the lives of children and young people in out of home care. They wanted **case managers to be powerful advocates**, like 'bulldogs', who fight for what is best for them. They wanted case managers who act with empathy, who understand mental health issues and were willing to be flexible with rules and procedures.

Those present wanted more **frequent and direct contact to their case manager**, independent of anyone else in their lives. A number of young people highlighted the importance of **'matching' case managers and young people** to ensure a good fit, or giving young people some say in choosing a new case manager if the partnership isn't working.

Overall, the young people present wanted case managers who **actually listen and genuinely care**.

### NEXT STEPS

1. CSD is preparing a more detailed report about what young people told them.
2. CSD will start acting on what we learnt from young people to continually improve our governance, planning and policies.
3. CSD will be hosting similar events in 2019 to hear more about young people's views and solutions. Young people told us that they want more opportunities to have their voices heard.

If you would like more information about the Youth Roundtable please email [CBRStepsUp@act.gov.au](mailto:CBRStepsUp@act.gov.au)

[www.communityservices.act.gov.au](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au)

Appendix A

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