Aboriginal Care Leavers Service System Review

Report

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We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands that we work on, and recognise the continuing connection to Country, waters and communities. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; and to Elders both past and present, and to their children and young people who are our future Elders and caretakers of this land.

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Affirmation

Except as acknowledged by references to other authors and publications, the project described here consists of our own work, undertaken to understand the experiences and views of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in Victoria who support children and young people transition from care. Information and data must be used only with the consent of VACCA.

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Glossary/Acronyms and Abbreviations

Term	Description
Aboriginal	In this report, Aboriginal refers to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.
ACCO(s)	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation(s). Aboriginal-led organisations that provide services to Aboriginal Community members.
Care leavers	In this report, care leavers are Aboriginal children and young people who have previously been in care in Australia. Care leavers may have aged out of the care system or have been formally reunified with their family. Care leavers also include children and young people who were in informal care placements.
DFFH	The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. The Victorian Government department responsible for Child Protection (including care services) and supporting children, families, and young people.
In care/care	A temporary, medium- or long-term alternative care and living arrangement for children and young people under 18 who cannot live with their family due to safety concerns such as abuse, family breakdown, or neglect. Children and young people in care may be due to Child Protection intervention or informal voluntary arrangements. Types of care include foster care, kinship care, residential care, and permanent care. Care services and systems are sometimes referred to as out-of-home care.
Mainstream	Community Service Organisations, sometimes referred to as CSOs, are organisations that are not Aboriginal-led and provide services to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the community.
VACCA	Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency. VACCA is the leading Aboriginal child welfare organisation in Victoria, and the largest ACCO provider of child and family services.

Executive Summary

In 2025, VACCA applied for a DFFH Innovation and Learning Grant to undertake a project that focused on developing an understanding of the leaving care system for Aboriginal young people, including best practice and service and system changes needed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal young people leaving care. The project entailed a desktop review of Australian leaving care literature and consultations with Victorian ACCOs about the leaving care system.

Key questions for the project included the following:

1. How well do the existing leaving care models and system support Aboriginal young people leaving care in Victoria?
2. What are the typical transition from care practices?
3. What are the enablers and barriers to delivering transition from care services experienced by Victorian ACCOs and how do these factors influence the delivery of care leaver programs?
4. How can the leaving care system be strengthened to enhance Aboriginal care leavers experiences and outcomes?

Methodology

The project involved a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, incorporating a desktop review of literature focused on leaving care systems or care leaver experience, and community conversation with Victorian ACCOs that provide leaving care services. Findings from the desktop review supported the identification of conversation focus areas.

From December 2025 to April 2026, eight community conversations were hosted with Goolum Goolum, VACCA, and Wathaurong staff participating. All staff from the included ACCOs with experience supporting children and young people transition from care were invited to take part in a conversation. A total of 76 staff (20 identified as Aboriginal) attended a conversation to share their experiences and perspectives on supporting Aboriginal care leavers.

Key findings

Six themes emerged from our community conversations and were supported by findings from the desktop review.

Culture and connection are key

Staff described the importance of culture and cultural connection for care leavers. However, across conversations and the existing literature, there was wide held belief that non-ACCO organisations and service providers do not value or understand the importance of culture.

ACCO difference in supporting leaving care

The support and position of ACCOs is significantly different to that of mainstream organisations within the sector. Within the existing literature and throughout

conversations, the belief that ACCOs are better able to support care leavers in their transitions from care and connection with culture was prominent. However, due to the deep embedding of ACCOs within the communities they serve, ACCO staff are held to a higher standard than DFFH and often are held responsible for any perceived failures to support care leavers.

System and service challenges

Staff described poor care leaver outcomes as being reflective of wider system problems. For staff, supporting Aboriginal care leavers through leaving care was not only about the quality of their work, but it was also about recognising areas of system failure in the care system. Challenges related to the leaving care system and services identified were systemic racism, service inflexibility and shortages, weak service collaboration, and unrealistic expectations.

Who is a 'good' parent

Across conversations, staff challenged who and what a good parent is. For many staff and in the wider literature, concerns existed around the unequal dynamics between DFFH and Aboriginal parents. Concerns were raised also about the quality of care and parenting offered by DFFH, and the impact this had on care leavers.

Workforce value and connection

Staff supporting care leavers are critical to the leaving care system, however, staff are often overworked, unsupported, and suffer burnout. Often competing pressures and expectations placed on staff undermined their ability to support care leavers to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Voice, choice, and readiness matter when leaving care

Staff consistently emphasised that care leavers having a voice and choice in their transition planning is the foundation for positive outcomes, with many viewing readiness and skill development as inherent occurrences when that is achieved. Across the conversations and the existing literature, empowering care leavers to be heard, self-determined, and supported to be independent, were identified as central components of good practice.

Recommendations

The project identified 12 recommendations to strengthen the Victorian leaving care system:

1. Government develop and implement policies and strategies to reform the Victorian leaving care system to:
    a. Extend the age limit for all leaving care supports and funding, not just Transition to Independent Living Allowance, from 21 to 25 years, aligning with definitions of youth.
    b. Convert from age-based to gradual ability-based leaving care transitions, ensuring care leavers have the skills and supports they need before they leave care.
    c. Extend all leaving care supports to voluntary placement care leavers and care leavers that have reunified with their parents.

d. Ensure that funding and targets match the number of care leavers, ensuring that all care leavers have equal access to support and that all Aboriginal care leavers have the opportunity to receive leaving care services delivered by an ACCO.
e. Commence leaving care planning earlier (e.g., from 12 years-old), allowing for greater planning opportunities.
f. Extend funding of care programs (e.g., kinship care) to offer extended support (i.e., post-care support) to care leavers.
g. Support service and system co-design with care leavers.

2. Government, in collaboration with DFFH, develop and implement policies and strategies to prevent, address and monitor racism at individual, organisation and systemic levels within the leaving care system.
3. Government strengthen shared accountability for care leaver outcomes, including measures to reduce power imbalances between ACCOs and Government, support equitable partnerships and strengthen Aboriginal-led decision-making in line with the Supporting Stable and Strong Families legislation.
4. Government increase investment in the leaving care workforce and invest in an Aboriginal-led redesign of the leaving care system, including the Better Futures program.
5. Government increase investment in family finding and genograms for Aboriginal children and young people in care. This includes expansion of family finding services to enable family finding and reunification at all stages of care journeys.
6. DFFH, in partnership with ACCOs, develop a clear and actionable step-by-step guide for staff to follow when supporting care leavers and improve role clarity.
7. ACCOs recognise and prioritise skill building of care leavers who desire to become future mentors and join the care workforce.
8. ACCOs strengthen their workforce capabilities by embedding ongoing opportunities for staff to engage in reflective practice with upper management and participate in training opportunities.
9. Government increase investment in services designed to reduce DFFH intervention and increase family healing services.
10. DFFH bolster the implementation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, including maintaining and supporting Aboriginal children and young peoples connect to culture and family and the critical role that accurate and up-to-date culturally relevant documentation plays in this.
11. DFFH, in collaboration with Government, strengthen accountability for completion and following of processes to properly prepare children and young people in care for leaving care (e.g., connection to family and culture maintained, teaching financial literacy, etc.), and ensuring care leavers have access to their key documentation (e.g., birth certificates and assessments).
12. DFFH implement state-wide mechanisms to ensure consistent DFFH practice, supported by mandatory, ongoing cultural awareness and anti-racism training for all DFFH staff, to strengthen culturally safe and responsive decision-making across the leaving care system.

1. Introduction

1.1 General Context

The forced removal of Aboriginal children and young people from family and culture, under the guise of care and protection, created the Stolen Generations, of which the enduring impacts remain felt by Aboriginal families and Communities (O'Donnell et al., 2019). This history of colonisation and forced child removal continues to shape the ways in which Aboriginal families engage with child protective services within Australia, and as a growing body of literature demonstrates, continues to shape child protection and the care system (Beaufils, 2026). As of June 2024, around 20,000 Aboriginal children and young people were in care in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2026). This indicates an overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in care, as they making up 41% of kids in care, but only 6% of the total Australian population of 0–17-year-olds (Liddle et al., 2024).

To reduce the life outcomes gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia, created by colonisation, the Australian government introduced the Closing the Gap reform agreement in 2008 (O'Donnell et al., 2019). In 2020, the agreement was replaced by the National Agreement on Closing the Gap which featured additional targets, including Target 12 - the reduction of overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in care by 45% by 2031 (Australian Government & Coalition of Peaks, 2020). While efforts have been made to meet the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Target 12, progress has been slow, especially within Victoria. In Victoria, Aboriginal young people are 15 times more likely to be in care compared to their non-Aboriginal peers, the highest rate in the country (Productivity Commission, 2026). Concerningly, in Victoria between 2021 and 2025 the number of Aboriginal children and young people has increased by 3.7% (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2026), indicating that the gap between Aboriginal children and young people and their non-Aboriginal peers is continuing to increase not decrease.

While there is no official national definition of a care leaver, in Victoria the Child Protection (CP) Division of the Department of Fairness, Families and Housing (DFFH, 2021) defines a care leaver as a young person over 16 who has been on a care order and is moving from care to independent living. The Department of Human Services (2017)[1] categorises leaving care into three overlapping phases:

- Preparation – preparing the child or young person to leave care,
- Transition – formalising plans, and reviewing and linking children and young people with supports needed to sustain them upon exit, and
- Post-care – the culmination of the previous two phases, the child or young person is no longer in care and should have appropriate accommodation,

[1] In February 2021, the Department of Health and Human Services commenced operation as two new departments. The new Department of Health maintained responsibility for the health portfolio, and the new Department of Families, Fairness and Housing maintained responsibility for the Child Protection, housing and disability, and prevention of family violence portfolio.

employment/study, and income. Additionally, the child or young person should be aware of and engaging with services as necessary to support their independence.

Around 11,000 children and young people left care in Australia in 2023-24 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2026). Of those who left care, 2,312 children and young people left due to ageing out of care (turning 18-years old; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2026). However, as Australia does not have a national care leaver database, it is unknown the type of placements that these children and young people left (Mendes & McCurdy, 2020), and those who self-placed or left care prior to 18 are not included in these figures (Mendes et al., 2025). Despite incomplete care leaver data, research has found a range of negative and positive outcomes for care leavers. Poor outcomes experienced by care leavers include homelessness and difficulties accessing housing (Buchanan, 2021; McDowall, 2022), involvement with justice (Mendes, 2019), financial hardship (McDowall, 2022; Starr et al., 2025), substance abuse and addiction (Mendes, 2019), poor physical and mental health (Buchanan, 2021; Commission for Children and Young People, 2020; Purtell et al., 2019), early parenthood and pregnancy (Commission for Children and Young People, 2020; Purtell et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2023), family and intimate partner violence (Boman, 2025; Mendes et al., 2022), and family reunification and relationship difficulties (O'Donnell, MacRae, et al., 2020). Conversely, identified positive care leaver outcomes include connection with culture and Community (Mendes et al., 2022), connection with previously neglected aspects of identity and family (Boman, 2022), and development of positive friendships (Purtell et al., 2019; Starr et al., 2025). Within Victoria itself, accounting for inflation, poor leaving care outcomes are estimated to cost the state $1,192,260 per care leaver per year (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019).

In Victoria, once a young person in care reaches 15-years of age, planning to support their transition from care must commence. Planning for leaving care requires the young person's care team, in conjunction with the young person, to complete and regularly review a Looking After Children 15+ Care and Transition plan which captures their aspirations and needs (Department of Families, 2023). Care leavers that are in foster care, kinship care or residential care on or after their 16th birthday and on a Care by Secretary Order, Long-Term Care Order, Permanent Care Order or Family Reunification Order have access to leaving care support from the Better Futures program (Victorian Government, 2024). Better Futures is a flexible support program designed to offer case work support and flexible funding to care leavers up to 21 years of age. Under the Better Futures umbrella there are two additional key service offerings, Home Stretch and Community Connections. Community Connections supports care leavers to develop strong social connections and link in with services and activities available in their community (Victorian Government, 2024). Home Stretch provides financial assistance to support care leavers housing until they turn 21 years old[2]. For care leavers that opt to remain with their carer (foster, kinship or permanent) post-care this assistance is in the form of an allowance paid

[2] If a care leaver moves to a living arrangement not approved by Home Stretch (i.e., living with family, moving overseas, or incarceration/detention) prior to 21 years of age they will become ineligible to receive Home Stretch, and their assistance will be suspended. If the care leaver returns to a supported living arrangement prior to turning 21 years old their assistance can be reinstated.

directly to their carer[3], while care leavers that move into independent living directly receive an allowance to support their housing costs (e.g., rent and bills; Department of Families, 2022). Additional housing and housing assistance is available to care leavers at risk of homelessness within 6 months of leaving care and aged between 16 years and 6 months and 17 years and 6 months through the Housing First program (Department of Families, 2026). Care leavers in Victoria can additionally access Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA), a $1,500 payment covered by the Commonwealth government available to care leavers 15 to 25 years of age and designed to assist with purchases related to transitioning to independent living (e.g., transportation and essential household appliances; Department of Social Services, 2024).

Despite the positive intent of leaving care supports for care leavers within Victoria, significant concerns regarding the ability of these services to support all care leavers remain. Concerns namely relate to the disproportionate funding allocated to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people with leaving care supports, meaning that ACCOs are unable to meet current and future leaving care service demand (Mendes et al., 2020). Additional concerns relate to the ongoing ineligibility of informal placement care leavers to access government implemented leaving care supports, and the leaving care support access difficulties that arise for mobile or transient care leavers (e.g., Victorian care leavers who move to Tasmania are ineligible to access post-care supports from the Tasmanian government).

1.2 Project Context

Despite Aboriginal children and young people accounting for a significant portion of those in care and leaving care, limited focus has been placed on Aboriginal children and young people's experiences and pathways to leaving care, and the experience of ACCOs supporting Aboriginal children and young people through this process. This project aimed to help fill this gap in knowledge.

This project was funded by a DFFH Innovation and Learning Grant, with the purpose of understanding the leaving care system for Aboriginal young people and what effective practice looked like. The project also sought to identify the service and system changes needed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal young people leaving care. Key questions for the project included the following:

1. How well do the existing leaving care models and system support Aboriginal young people leaving care in Victoria?
2. What are the typical transition from care practices?
3. What are the enablers and barriers to delivering transition from care services experienced by Victorian ACCOs and how do these factors influence the delivery of care leaver programs?

[3] If a care leaver chooses to move from their carers home to independent living the Home Stretch carer allowance will be cancelled and is unable to be reinstated even if the care leaver later returns to living with their carer.

4. How can the leaving care system be strengthened to enhance Aboriginal care leavers experiences and outcomes?

The project consisted of two key components - a desktop review and community conversations.

The project was led and project managed by the Research and Evidence Development team within the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA). Due to the Victoria wide project focus, staff members from the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (VAYCPA) were invited to form a joint governance group with VACCA staff. The governance group was led by VACCA and was formed to provide oversight, and support project decision-making.

2. Methodology

The methodology of the project was shaped by the overarching aim to understand the leaving care system for Aboriginal children and young people. Due to the limited understanding of the leaving care experience for Aboriginal children and young people and ACCOs, the project employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods, incorporating a desktop review, community conversations and feedback survey.

We did not directly involve care leavers in this research due to ethical considerations. Due to the potential for care leaver participants to also access services with the ACCOs involved in this research, we did not seek to directly engage with care leavers to minimise risk of obtaining uninformed and involuntary participation.

2.1 Desktop Review

We conducted a desktop review to get a system wide understanding of care leavers and leaving care and easily identify research gaps to inform the community conversations. Documents reviewed included relevant policies, academic and peer-reviewed literature, and grey literature.

To identify relevant evidence, several databases were searched using key words. Evidence included within the review were required to meet the following criteria:

- Published since 2015,
- Be in English, and
- Be about the Australian leaving care system or Australian care leaver experiences.

The desktop review focused on reviewing the broader care leaver system for all children and young people to provide context for understanding the experiences of Aboriginal children. While the project focused specifically on services provided to Aboriginal young people, the policies, practices and decision-making processes that affect them operate within the wider care leaver system. Examining the broader system perspective enabled the research to identify the structural factors shaping the experiences of Aboriginal young people and their outcomes.

Select desktop review findings are presented below with findings from the community conversations, however, see Appendix 1 for the full report of the desktop review.

2.2 Community Conversations

Community conversations are an action research method that involves structured discussions that bring together individuals with diverse views to share, listen and connect about issues or challenges that are important to them. We chose to use community conversations due to their ability to bring together diverse perspectives, support empowerment, and encourage communities to be self-determining. Community conversations recognise that individuals within a community are the experts on issues important to their community and together can identify potential solutions (Swedeen et al., 2011). We supported ACCOs to determine time, place, format and the staff they invited to their conversation. We created conversational spaces that were safe and respectful and fostered a spirit of openness and reflection. We intentionally placed cultural items within

arm's reach of participants throughout the conversation spaces to visually reflect Aboriginal culture.

To capture organisational and regional diversity in experiences, all ACCOs within Victoria that provide leaving care services or have experience supporting care leavers were invited to take part in the conversations. The VACYPA supported external ACCO contact via email, while the project manager directly contacted internal ACCO staff. Each conversation with participating ACCOs was scheduled by the project manager who invited each ACCO or region to self-identify and select the staff members they wished to be part of their conversation.

The community conversations were designed to occur as a single table discussion, encouraging a sense of community, connection, and group ownership. To support this and maintain a safe and supportive environment for discussion, each conversation was limited to a maximum of 25 participants. The findings from the desktop review informed the conversation questions, focusing on gathering ACCO perspectives and experiences of the current leaving care system, good practice, and possible service and system improvements. A total of six questions were formulated to be asked during the community conversations. Additionally, a summary of the desktop review findings and a factsheet were provided at the start of each conversation, to frame the discussion. Each conversation took two to three hours allowing for a maximum of 30 minutes to respond to each question. These conversations were audio recorded. Following each conversation, participants were asked to reflect on their experience via an anonymous online survey and were provided with a summary of their conversation which they were encouraged to provide feedback on. See Appendix 2 for the list of community conversation questions and Appendix 3 for a summary of all conversations.

2.2.1 Who we spoke to

We held a total of eight community conversations – six with VACCA staff capturing all VACCA regions, one with Goolum Goolum staff, and one with Wathaurong staff. We spoke to a total of 76 staff with experience supporting Aboriginal care leavers, with 20 identifying as Aboriginal. Majority of the staff we spoke to were part of the Better Futures program, however, staff from care services, early school leavers, family services, foster care, kinship care, Nugel, out-of-home care, TCP, and youth housing also participated.

2.2.2 What staff thought of the conversations

A total of 35 staff provided feedback on their experience of the community conversations. Overall feedback indicated that staff found the community conversations to be a positive experience. Participant feedback indicated that:

- 97% strongly agreed or agreed that they felt welcomed in the conversation,
- 89% strongly agreed or agreed that they felt positive about the conversation,
- 86% strongly agreed or agreed that the conversation was useful,
- 91% strongly agreed or agreed that they were able to participate and provide input during the conversation,
- 91% strongly agreed or agreed that everybody had an equal opportunity to participate,

- 94% strongly agreed or agreed that the conversation agenda was clear,
- 97% strongly agreed or agreed that conversation was well facilitated,
- 100% strongly agreed or agreed that they understood all information shared with them during the conversation,
- 83% strongly agreed or agreed that they were able to ask questions important to them,
- 89% strongly agreed or agreed that topics important to them were covered in the conversation, and
- 94% strongly agreed or agreed that next steps were clear to them.

Additionally, staff reflected that they would like to see intentional and meaningful changes to occur to leaving care processes and system as a result of our conversation. See Appendix 4 for further staff feedback on their conversation experience.

2.2.3 Data analysis and validation

Audio files of the community conversations were transcribed by a private transcription service and were deleted thereafter. Transcripts were then analysed in NVivo following the Reflexive Thematic Analysis protocol outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). Anonymous feedback survey responses were analysed in Microsoft Excel using descriptive statistics. All data and information gathered as part of this project are or were stored in a password protected and limited access folder within the Research and Evidence Development team SharePoint.

A sense making workshop was held with members of the working group to share findings from the community conversations and provide an opportunity for the working group to interpret the data and contribute to recommendations based on findings.

2.3 Limitations

There are some limitations to our project. Firstly, while the preparation phase is foundational in the leaving care process, we opted to place a greater focus on the transitional and post-care phases. This focus allowed us to form a more complete understanding of processes and outcomes associated with active transitions and post-care. Despite focusing more on the transitional and post-care phases, we do touch on the preparation phase within our findings. We recommend that further research is conducted focusing primarily on the preparation phase to support greater understanding of the implications this phase has for Aboriginal care leavers outcomes and experiences.

Secondly, while we had intended to capture ACCO voices throughout Victoria, we were unable to achieve the level of organisational diversity or regional coverage that we had hoped for with our community conversations because of competing demands and limited availability of relevant staff. Additionally, as each organisation and region was asked to self-identify relevant participants, it is possible that some staff with relevant experiences may not have been invited to participate. While these limitations are not uncommon within research focused on care service staff or research more broadly, we encourage further research to capture ACCO staff voices and experiences, especially within smaller and more regional organisations.

3. Findings

3.1 What we heard

Community conversations highlighted the importance of the role of ACCOs within the leaving care system to support Aboriginal children and young people to successfully transition from care.

The following six key themes emerged from our conversations with ACCO staff:

1. Culture and connection are key
2. ACCO difference in supporting leaving care
3. System and service challenges
4. Who is a 'good' parent
5. Workforce value and connection
6. Voice, choice, and readiness matter when leaving care

These themes are supported by findings from the desktop review.

Together the themes addressed the key project questions identifying the ability of the existing leaving care models and system to support Victorian Aboriginal care leavers, what the typical Victorian ACCO transitions from care practices are, and what enables and is a barrier to Victorian ACCOs delivery of leaving care programs. Additionally, the themes demonstrate areas that can be strengthened to improve the experiences and outcomes of Aboriginal care leavers.

3.1.1 Culture and connection are key

This theme reflects the identified importance of culture and connection within all stages of leaving care, and staffs' perceptions that Aboriginal children and young people's connection to kin and culture were devalued by CP and mainstream organisations. Staff accounts drew a contrast between the evidenced role of culture as a protective factor (Mendes & Purtell, 2021; Wallace et al., 2021), able to help Aboriginal children and young people to feel connected, safe and understood, and the low prioritisation of maintaining cultural connection by CP and mainstream organisations.

Within the conversation and the existing literature, prioritisation of connecting Aboriginal care leavers with culture was important for positive leaving care and post-care outcomes. Staff stressed the importance of young people being connected to their culture, sharing the impact that connection to culture had for one young person:

> It wasn't until he started working with [personal name] and working on his culture with [personal name] and hanging out with some of the other young fellas that he really wanted to learn more about his culture. And he really craved that because he felt, even though he knew he was Aboriginal, he felt like the left one out, the odd one out in that setting. So yeah, and then being able to find his birth parents, and then linking back with them, find out who his mob was, it was life-changing for him. Like, he started going to all our NAIDOC events. And yeah, he's such a proud Aboriginal man now. (regional Victoria ACCO staff)

Staff highlighted that supporting children and young people's connection with family and Community supported their connection to culture and positive post-care outcomes. While the relationships between care leavers and their families were complex and deeply interconnected with experiences of being in care and leaving care, staff expressed that: "ensuring young people are connected to Community and culturally appropriate supports… supports a smooth transition" (regional Victoria ACCO staff), and "[a] good transition involves connecting kids with family and their culture" (metro Victoria ACCO staff). This is consistent with the findings of Mendes et al. (2022) and Starr et al. (2025) who found that connection with culture, Country, Community and family were central to facilitating Aboriginal care leavers smooth transitions from care, and aligned with Aboriginal Child Placement Principle which highlight the importance of maintaining and supporting Aboriginal children in cares connection with culture, family, and Community.

In many instances, staff positioned the accuracy and quality of cultural support plans as an important tool for supporting care leavers' connections to culture, and evidence of the devaluation of culture by CP and mainstream organisations. Staff frequently noted the high value that ACCOs place on cultural support plans, and the lack of and prevalence of inaccurate cultural support plans when young people were transferred from CP or other mainstream organisations to ACCOs, as highlighted by one practitioner: "when they get sent to us from child protection, there's no… cultural documents or anything like that. And if you do get it, it's wrong as well" (regional Victoria ACCO staff). Staff accounts of missing or inaccurate cultural documents echo the findings from literature exploring Aboriginal care leaver experiences in Australia. Mendes et al. (2022) found that Aboriginal children and young people leaving care often did so without a cultural support plan or with a poor-quality cultural support plan. Furthermore, Mendes et al. (2020) also described the persistent challenge and presence of devaluation of culture, noting that the absence of (accurate) cultural support plans led Aboriginal care leavers to feel unsupported to navigate their identity and connection to culture, family and Community.

The devaluation of culture and connection is further evidenced by the lack of funding for cultural connection program planning and service delivery and a lack of funding for workforce cultural skills. ACCOs have consistently received less funding than mainstream organisations (Baidawi, Saunders, et al., 2017; Commission for Children and Young People, 2019; Jau et al., 2022; Mendes et al., 2016; O'Donnell, Hatzikiriakidis, et al., 2020), contributing to staff feeling that CP attributed no financial value to culture, expecting it to be provided for free by both staff and carers. As one staff member reflected: "in theory… we should have an additional skill set. Culture should be at the forefront of everything we do in and amongst doing the job that people at MacKillop are doing, and we get paid less" (metro Victoria ACCO staff). The lack of funding was noted to negatively impact staff's work with care leavers, reducing availability of cultural programs, as well as opportunities to take part in return to Country and cultural mentorship. Aboriginal care leavers reduced access to cultural affirming support and activities raises a concern echoed by staff, that the devaluation of culture is being internalised by Aboriginal care leavers:

> We find a lot of our kids aren't proud of their identity because they don't have any context around their identity. It's been lost… It's not carried with them through their journey, their out-of-home care journey. It's not up there with the date of

> birth and these other kind of things about them… Some of the CSPs [cultural support plans] we get from transfers also just say, mob is just unknown, still identifying… it doesn't really travel with them. (regional Victoria ACCO staff)

In summary, this theme highlights flaws within the existing leaving care models and systems ability to support Aboriginal care leavers in Victoria due to the perceived lack of prioritisation of culture and connection by CP and mainstream organisation and the prevalence of inaccurate cultural support plans and limited funding assigned to culture and cultural skills. These flaws present as major jeopardising factors to Aboriginal care leavers transitions, experiences and outcomes, and the ability of ACCOs to support and deliver leaving care programs. Prioritisation and valuing of culture and connection are indicative areas that the leaving care system can be strengthened to improve Aboriginal care leavers experiences and outcomes.

3.1.2 ACCO difference is supporting leaving care

This theme captures the interface between the service and support ACCOs provide in leaving care and that of mainstream organisations. Within the literature and in the conversations, ACCOs were often portrayed as having unique strengths and practices which positioned them as better able to support Aboriginal care leavers (Mendes et al., 2016).

Staff noted that ACCOs are a manifestation of the Community's self-governance and self-determination, reflected in ACCO cultural competence and practice. This not only supported an environment where care leavers felt safe, understood, and able to explore their cultural identity, but also supported staff to be better positioned to support care leavers as "ACCOs have more understanding of the culture and the cultural needs of the young person when transitioning. So, [ACCOs provide] more cultural healing… having that cultural understanding and having that cultural need met in the transition planning is important" (metro Victoria ACCO staff). Conversations with staff revealed that programs in ACCOs are effective and powerful due to their holistic approach. Staff shared that the support provided to care leavers, focused not only on the young person as an individual but also on their family and community. The key role of ACCOs in supporting Aboriginal care leavers is consistent with the findings of Grage-Moore et al. (2024) who identified that Aboriginal care leavers whose transition planning was led by an ACCO had better outcomes. Furthermore, mainstream organisation staff in Mendes et al. (2016) expressed that ACCO support of Aboriginal care leavers was a key asset to the leaving care system. Similarly, ACCO staff in Mendes et al. (2020) shared that true self-determination requires Aboriginal care leavers to be supported by ACCOs through programs that they had full freedom in designing.

However, the close relationship between ACCOs and the communities they served, at times, was a source of tension and conflict for ACCO staff. The closeness and accessibility of ACCO staff often meant they were the first point of contact for Community members and families and were held to account for perceived failures to support care leavers, regardless of who, between the ACCO and the wider system (e.g., CP and DFFH), had failed them. As shared by one staff member: "they'll be like 'Oh, why are you doing this to your

own family?' and so they think I'm turning my back" (metro Victoria ACCO staff). The combination of accountability and close ties to community motivated staff to ensure that ACCOs remained accountable to their communities, embraced innovative approaches, and did not fold to the pressure of DFFH expectations over Community needs, especially around the importance of culture as noted by one staff member: "we're… continuously fighting [and adding] that voice of the importance of culture, and we're sticking to our guns and things that we know that are crucial to the children" (regional Victoria ACCO staff).

Overall, this theme reflects on the role of ACCOs within the Victorian leaving care models and system, and barriers to ACCO leaving care program delivery. Importantly, staff framed the support that ACCOs provide care leavers as a key part of the current leaving care models and system in Victoria, enabling positive care leaver outcomes and experiences through holistic and cultural healing approaches to transition from care practices. However, ACCOs experience barriers to delivery of leaving care programs in Victoria due to staff being held accountable for all failures in the leaving care system, whilst also being unable to enact full self-determination in program design and delivery.

3.1.3 System and services challenges

This theme explores the failures of the leaving care system and the complex array of services which are within this system. Perceived failures and negative outcomes related to the current leaving care systems in Australia can directly be traced back to the original models of care, reinforcing disrupted kinship lines and stigmatising Aboriginal young people and their families (Bath, 2015). Staff emphasised that many of the barriers they experienced when supporting young people and their families leaving care were not accidental but were instead built into the system and how it operates. In part, this is reflected in the non-federalised approach to leaving care within Australia, which has resulted in highly fragmented leaving care systems (Mendes, 2022). O'Donnell, Hatzikiriakidis, et al. (2020) argue that while there are attempts to implement a federal framework for leaving care, no specific funding has been attached to the framework, limiting improvements to leaving care systems. Staff consistently noted the need for system-wide change, with one staff member explaining: "I think the system is just a bit outdated. It needs probably an overhaul, and to see what's working and what's not working. Because I think there's quite a bit that's not working at the moment" (regional Victoria ACCO staff).

Key system and service challenges identified by staff included:

- Systemic racism,
- Service shortages and inflexible service eligibility,
- Weak service collaboration,
- Lack of (affordable) housing stock,
- Unequal funding for ACCOs,
- Limited service and system focus on child and young person's healing, and
- Unrealistic expectations.

The leaving care system challenges noted by staff align with other studies which have highlighted the failings of leaving care services and systems to support Aboriginal care leavers, their families, and their communities (Baidawi, Saunders, et al., 2017; Mendes et al., 2022), and the need for real system change (McDowall, 2022), due to the failures in legislation, policy and practice (Mendes, 2019; Mendes & McCurdy, 2020). The alignment between challenges raised by staff and those identified in literature focused on other states and territories (e.g., Mendes et al., 2022), suggests that the challenges experienced by staff transcend extend beyond the Victorian leaving care system, reflecting the need for Australia-wide change.

Strict service access eligibility, a noted problem in leaving care systems (Grage-Moore et al., 2024; McDowall, 2022), was identified by staff as a main barrier preventing Aboriginal care leavers from accessing the supports they needed. Service variations and gaps, and service collaboration also presented as challenges. Services available to care leavers, such as Better Futures and Housing First, were overcapacity and unable to meet service demand, while other critical services such as mental health supports were absent in some regions. Long waitlists, restrictive service eligibility (e.g., Confirmation of Aboriginality requirements), DFFH decentralisation, and inconsistent service availability meant that care leavers with complex or fluctuating needs were left without appropriate support and assessments (e.g., Functional Needs Assessment).

Furthermore, staff noted that while teamwork and collaboration were valued and treated as core to their work within their organisations, external collaboration was often more fractured and challenging. These relationships, often with CP but at times with mainstream organisations, were described as more difficult to form and maintain, not necessarily culturally safe, and on occasion, paternalistic rather than collaborative in nature as described by one staff member: "I don't answer to the department… I work alongside you… we collab together, not me answer to you" (metro Victoria ACCO staff). Despite the challenging external relationships, staff wanted to see greater external collaboration for the sake of the young people they support, sharing that: "everyone should focus on the main goal, to raise that child and empower them, and encourage them, and remind them of who they are" (regional Victoria ACCO staff). The combination of system fragmentation, service difficulties and gaps, and weak external collaboration increases potential for inconsistent care leaver outcomes and pathways and undermined the purpose of leaving care programs – to prepare care leavers to live independently- and Aboriginal care leavers abilities to access the support they needed and thrive post-care.

As staff reflected on their roles, they often described the challenge of working in a system that they described as being characterised by structural inequality and racism, while actively fighting for system change. For many staff, this was a source of dissonance and discomfort which shaped their navigation of the system individually and with care leavers. The predominant narrative shared by staff was that cycles of disadvantage triggered by colonial child protection practices were continually being reinforced due to a lack of system change. Staff argued that they felt like they were "trying to fit Aboriginal kids into a non-Aboriginal system" (metro Victoria ACCO staff) and they "put them into a system that

they don't fit into" (metro Victoria ACCO staff) where they were often "just overlooked" (regional Victoria ACCO staff). As highlighted in discussion by one staff member:

> The system keeps going. We've got some kiddies that have got third gen[eration] child protection… grandparents sitting there at 40s, 50s and generation after generation, intervention, removal, it just keeps going because we're not setting them up to succeed. (metro Victoria ACCO staff)

Further, one staff member shared that the system is "a systematic [systemic] failure. It's gone from overt racism to this systematic racism, where it's just piling these Aboriginal children into the streets, putting them in perfect disadvantage, which, as we know, feeds into that cyclical nature" (regional Victoria ACCO staff). In noting the continued cycle of system involvement, staff further highlighted the propensity of system challenges to shape Aboriginal care leavers experiences and outcomes.

The system and service challenges were compounded by unrealistic expectations of care leavers. Staff repeatedly spoke about unrealistic expectations that CP hold for care leavers achievement, sharing that "they're [CP] expecting outcomes that are not realistic to the young person's situation and ability" (metro Victoria ACCO staff). Reflective of placement in care, care leavers' lives are more complex than their non-care experienced peers (Mendes, 2019), shaped often by trauma. As shared by one staff member:

> I think just even on top of normal teenage… if you add in complex trauma, things like that, that's a whole different level of complexity that they've [care leavers] got going on as well… a lot I can imagine are just in survival mode by the time they get to that age [leaving care]. (regional Victoria ACCO staff)

Given care leavers complex lives, expectations of care leavers to begin exiting care at age 18, and be fully independent by 21 years of age, are unrealistic and do not reflect realities observed by staff. The tension between actual care leaver ability and unrealistic system expectations is widely documented in the existing literature, which has critiqued the system expectations for care leavers as failing to accommodate care leaver needs. Research suggests that many care leavers are not developmentally ready to live independently at age 18 and recommends age-based leaving care requirements are removed (Grage-Moore et al., 2024). Furthermore, inquiry into leaving care in Victoria by the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People (2020), identified that the leaving care system is failing to prepare young people for their independence and development of a new model of care was needed.

In summary, this theme highlights the need for clear and urgent system reform due to the failure of the existing leaving care models and system to support Aboriginal care leavers within Victoria. Notably, this theme highlights key areas that the leaving care system can be strengthened to enhance care leaver experiences and outcomes, primarily service and program coordination, increased service capacity and access, and addressing of systemic racism.

3.1.4 Who is a 'good' parent

This theme reflects on the concept of what and who is a good parent, and who ultimately defines these concepts. Staff's accounts within this theme reflect the inherently unequal dynamics between Aboriginal parents and DFFH, and the subsequent impact this imbalance has on the experiences and outcomes of Aboriginal care leavers.

The concept of what is and isn't good parenting or who is and isn't a good parent was often at the core of the community conversations. Staff shared their concerns about how DFFH judged Aboriginal parents' parenting abilities. They expressed scepticism of the benefits of removing children from their families, sharing that children and young people removed often experienced greater trauma than if they had stayed with their family. A practitioner shared that: "a lot of [the] families who we see the child get taken off, and [the child] probably ends up worse than they were with them" (regional Victorian ACCO staff). A common impact of child removal discussed was the destabilising effect it had for care leavers as many experienced multiple placements throughout their care journey which hindered their ability to form healthy relationships and attachments with their carers and wider community.

Consistent with the findings of Mendes (2018) and Mendes et al. (2023), concerns extended beyond child removal to the treatment of children and young people once they went into care and when leaving care. Staff frequently shared examples of the mismatch between the level of support young people needed and the level of support DFFH provided. It seemed like DFFH took a deficit approach, not focusing on young people's strengths, instead, their approach lacked a human response. They reflected that for DFFH: "it's [leaving care] more about the stats and the KPIs rather than the person. They [DFFH] don't see people at all" (regional Victorian ACCO staff).

The use of funding was commonly used as an example by staff to explain their frustrations with how DFFH behaved as the 'parent' of care leavers. Staff explained that by DFFH removing kids from their families, "it's the government's responsibility to address this [the kids needs] and to provide our kids more funding to address what they've done" (metro Victoria ACCO staff). For staff, removing kids from their families meant that DFFH became their parent by proxy, responsible for meeting all of their needs (physical, emotional, cultural, financial). However, difficulty with getting DFFH to pay for young people's needs, such as assessments and healthcare, was a commonly reported challenge which continued to have ramifications for young people once they left care (e.g., impacted NDIS service access). Staff also shared that the reluctance of DFFH to financially contribute to work supporting reunification, having "seen them not pay for parents to get better" (regional Victorian ACCO staff), reduced family healing and reunification. At the same time, staff also noted a reluctance of DFFH to provide sufficient financial and emotional support to prevent breakdown of placements, highlighting tensions between the judgment of Aboriginal parents and DFFHs reluctance to behave as a parent themselves or support others to undertake the parental role.

The tension between DFFHs parenting practice and the ways in which DFFH judge Aboriginal parents, was further illustrated by the misalignment between DFFH practice and societal norms. An example of this misalignment shared by both staff and the existing literature, was the practice of care leavers being "pushed" into independence before they are ready, a practice not aligned with 'normal' parenting and contradictory to societal changes that are seeing young people leaving home at an older age (Perkins, 2019; Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2018). Adding further to this unhealthy relationship dynamic is the penalisation of young people for reunifying with their parents after leaving care. Care leavers who return to parental care regardless of length of time, reason, or the identified benefits (e.g., Mendes et al., 2025), do not receive or cease to receive some post-care support (e.g., Home Stretch), severely limiting their ability to support themselves to become independent, maintain healthy and safe relationships with family, and continue ongoing service access to meet their needs. By penalising care leavers reuniting with their family and failing to act as a 'good' parent, care leavers are ultimately left isolated from their family and communities and with unhealthy relationship experiences and understanding.

Overall, this theme reflects on the impact of child removal and the ability of the 'corporate' parent to support Aboriginal children and young people in and leaving care. This theme highlights that the current 'corporate' parenting model used within Victoria does not support Aboriginal care leavers to thrive or commence healing and adds an additional layer of disadvantage that they must engage with as they gain their independence. Further, it highlights the need for reform to the parenting approach used by DFFH to enhance Aboriginal care leavers experiences and outcomes.

3.1.5 Workforce value and connection

This theme highlights the critical role of workforce in supporting care leavers, and how workforce conditions can support or restrict these relationships. Throughout our conversations staff expressed a sense of pride in the work they do and the connections they form with the children and young people they support. They also acknowledged the significant pressures, resource and system limitations, and emotional labour they struggled with. As shared by one practitioner: "it takes a special person to keep going, to keep smiling and say, 'You know, everything's gonna be all right'" (regional Victorian ACCO staff).

Staff spoke about the importance of building strong, consistent, empathetic, and trusting relationships with children and young people transitioning from care. They explained that while these relationships take time to develop and grow, they are at the heart of good practice, enabling young people to feel comfortable engaging with support in the voluntary space, and confident in voicing their needs, especially for those who had experienced multiple placements and disrupted relationships. These findings are mirrored in the literature, having found that staff persistence and long-term engagement with care leavers enables not only the development of trust and access to services, but is also a key enabler of positive outcomes for care leavers (Grage-Moore et al., 2024; Mendes et al., 2022). Conversely, the loss or lack of relationship and connection between staff and care leavers, often due to high staff turnover, compound care leavers experiences of

disappointment and trauma, making it difficult to engage with them throughout leaving care: "if they've come with that trauma and been let down a lot. They actually don't want to open up in fear that it's [life] just going to fall to [expletive] again" (regional Victorian ACCO staff).

Despite the critical role of staff in supporting care leavers, workforce conditions such as persistent pressure and feelings of being undervalued shaped staff practice, creating tension between desire for good practice and competing job demands. Existing care leaver research has indicated that staff have too high caseloads (Baidawi, Mendes, et al., 2017; Mendes et al., 2020; O'Donnell, MacRae, et al., 2020), and that there is subsequent high rates of staff turnover in the sector (Commission for Children and Young People, 2020; Mendes et al., 2023), both of which contribute to negative outcomes and experiences for care leavers. Furthermore, Mendes et al. (2020) found that Aboriginal staff experience additional burden, exhibiting greater stress and burnout due to trying to provide meaningful support to Aboriginal care leavers within a non-Aboriginal system. Staff echoed these concerns, expressing worry that their burnout and cultural load was leading to young people "getting a disservice" (regional Victorian ACCO staff). For staff, experiences of being time poor and overloaded within their roles, in combination with limited overall management support, made it difficult for them to provide the relational support that care leavers needed, sharing that "high caseloads mean a lack of relationship building… These young people need to feel like someone's got their back and they're not going to trust you after a single conversation once a year" (metro Victoria ACCO staff). These combined pressures created a pattern where there is a heavy reliance on staff practice (Boman, 2025; McDowall, 2022; Prendergast et al., 2024), while staff felt constrained in their ability to complete the key relational work needed to support care leavers to thrive independently.

Furthermore, staff discussed the need for care leavers engagement within the in care and leaving care workforce. Supporting care leavers to become engaged in the ACCO in care and leaving care workforce was raised by staff as an untaped area of potential with the ability to better engage care leavers with services due to shared lived experiences. Additionally, engaging care leavers within the ACCO workforce had the noted potential of increasing the number of Aboriginal staff within ACCOs, creating the workforce that ACCOs need for the future, while reducing care leaver unemployment and facilitating service and system changes to strengthen support of care leavers. Whilst some ACCOs currently do engage care leavers in their organisations as staff, this practice is currently not widely engaged, despite the suggested benefits, with due to unresolved concerns regarding privacy and conflicts of interest.

In summary, this theme highlights the critical role of workforce in the Victorian leaving care systems to support Aboriginal care leavers. Additionally, the theme highlights the restraints staff experienced when engaging in transition from care practice. Key relational work was at odds with high caseloads and was at times overlooked by organisational and DFFH emphasis on measurable outputs required for program funding. Within ACCOs their workforce was an enabler of their delivery of leaving care services, however, service delivery was impacted by staff feeling undervalued and unsupported. Lastly, this theme

highlighted the importance of care leavers entering the in care and leaving care workforce, presenting opportunity for strengthening the outcomes and experiences of future care leavers.

3.1.6 Voice, choice, and readiness matter when leaving care

This theme explores what care leavers need to have a good transition experience and good post-care outcomes. Within the literature it is well established that many care leavers feel unprepared for their independence (Cameron et al., 2019; Guardian for Children and Young People, 2024) and experience a range of negative post-care outcomes (Campo & Commerford, 2016; Mendes, 2019). Across the conversations and across the existing literature, empowering care leavers to be heard, self-determined, and ready for their independence were described as key components of good practice that support care leavers transition experiences and post-care outcomes.

Staff argued that care leavers were more likely to succeed and experience positive outcomes if their voices were heard, they made choices and felt ready for independence. Staff shared that when care leavers were provided with opportunities for their voices to be heard and to be involved in making important decisions that affected them and their lives, it made them confident, empowered them, and supported their process of becoming independent. As such the process of supporting young people to have voice and choice, lead their transition planning, and build these skills through "open, honest, transparent communication" (metro Victoria ACCO staff) were viewed by staff as being core aspects of good practice. Literature echoes this pattern, noting that best practice in supporting care leavers means that plans, services and supports are designed around care leaver needs (Buchanan, 2021; Cataldo et al., 2021; Clare et al., 2017; Connolly, 2023).

Staff consistently noted that while key to positive outcomes and good practice, care leavers often felt that their voices were not heard and that they didn't have choices. Superficial engagement with care leavers to develop their transition plans (Connolly, 2023; Mendes et al., 2023; Muir & Hand, 2018; Vosz et al., 2020) and having plans that ignore care leaver needs (e.g., therapeutic needs; Commission for Children and Young People, 2020; Office of the Children's Guardian, 2021) were not unusual occurrences. When discussing the prevalent lack of care leavers voices within their own transition plans, developed by both ACCOs and mainstream organisations, staff expressed frustration sharing that:

> it's all good and well that child protection have to tick these boxes before they [care leavers] turn 18. But I feel like it's the young person that should be saying, 'Well this is what I want, this is what I need, this is what I have.' … we all have tick the box of things we have to do. But it [transitions] really should be led from the young person, not from the worker. (regional Victorian ACCO staff)

Staff explained that for many young people feeling not heard or having no choice led them to become ambivalent and disengaged from leaving care processes and contributed to their experience of negative outcomes post-care. As illustrated by one staff member, when discussing the impact of voice and voicelessness on care leavers:

> more confidence [confident] within themselves, the empowerment, knowing that their voice has been heard and they do have a good care team to back them up…

but when a young person's not being heard or seen, they don't wanna engage with you. (metro Victoria ACCO staff)

Disengagement from supports due to previous experiences was a core issue that staff experienced when working with young people transitioning from care, at times preventing development of key practical skills (e.g., cooking skills, budgeting skills) and connections to key support. Staff employed the following strategies to overcome these barriers and ensure young people were ready for their transition:

- being flexible,
- person-centred,
- meeting young people where they are at in terms of readiness and healing, and
- making multiple transition plans with young people.

This helped to ensure care leavers and staff were prepared for any changes that occurred when leaving care, "whether there's a change in the plan or whether something doesn't come through that was expected to come through, whether it's funding or an option" (metro Victoria ACCO staff), young people and staff knew what they would do instead. However, often this was in tension with reality, with many care leavers having rushed or absent transition plans, usually due to late referral to leaving care supports (Commission for Children and Young People, 2020; McDowall et al., 2025; Mendes et al., 2020), and rushed transitions that resulted in their placement within independent living before they were ready and without them developing the skills they needed to thrive. These occurrences were especially prevalent for care leavers who transitioned from residential care or had experienced many placement breakdowns. As shared by one staff member when discussing these challenges: "They [CP] just essentially threw her into independent living when she wasn't ready… And it's really hard, because this young person has just been thrown into independent living, no choice of her own" (regional Victorian ACCO staff). These challenges also differed and intensified based on the program that care leavers were supported by, further impacting their preparation for transitioning from care and becoming independent:

> I feel like it's quite different because TCP… there's a lot more risk involved, it's a lot more complexity. But what I have noticed is… when I was doing foster care in the mainstream world, it was a lot more straightforward in a way. Like the leaving care, the transition process started pretty much around 16. They started really working on it and having a plan… what I've noticed in the TCP space is that there's a lot more complexity, and so you're dealing a lot with… crisis management before and it's a constantly dealing with crisis like family violence, drug use, housing instability…I think that you get caught up with that rather than working on goals at times because it's stabilising the environment for the young person… other leaving care processes get missed. (metro Victoria ACCO staff)

These accounts reveal the range and complexity of difficulties that staff experienced when preparing care leavers to leave care.

Overall, this theme reflects on the typical transition from care practices of ACCOs within Victoria, including what staff identify as good practice when supporting care leavers and

the complex range of challenges that hinder their ability to provide care leavers with this practice. Staff reflections indicated that for Aboriginal care leavers to experience positive outcomes, it is important that their plans, services and supports are designed around their needs, and that they feel confident and empowered during their journey to independence. Further, this theme suggests that further practice work and changes are needed to better ensure and support care leavers to have positive experiences and outcomes.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this project was to understand the leaving care system for Aboriginal young people, including best practice and service and system changes needed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal care leavers. Overwhelmingly the findings from both the desktop review and community conversations highlight the presence of issues within the existing leaving care system and model in Victoria, demonstrating that problems are not those of a single organisation but rather reflective of a system in failure and that the current models and system are unable to support Aboriginal care leavers.

Across themes, a consistent pattern emerged demonstrating the importance of Aboriginal models and practice, and that the support ACCOs provide Aboriginal care leavers is shaped by cultural pride, cultural practices, relational commitments, and a desire to support care leaver self-determination. However, a pattern of system, service, and structural constraints, in part due to continued paternalistic colonial ideas and failures to complete key tasks prior to leaving care, also shaped the ability of ACCOs to support Aboriginal care leavers. Together these demonstrated that while ACCO staff are deeply committed to supporting Aboriginal care leavers, they operate within conditions and systems that often limit their ability to fully meet the needs of Aboriginal care leavers and their families.

There is strong evidence for system wide change in supporting all care leavers throughout Australia. Currently it is apparent that while the leaving care systems aspire to support Aboriginal care leavers to become thriving independent members of society, the systems often fall short of offering the coordinated, culturally safe, relational, and developmentally attuned care required to achieve this goal. To ensure greater system fit and improve outcomes for Aboriginal care leavers, it is important that:

- culture and culturally grounded practice are acknowledged as central, not peripheral, elements of care leaver support,
- all Aboriginal care leavers are presented with the option to be supported by an ACCO,
- broader system limitations (e.g., service fragmentation, unrealistic expectations, are addressed to improve ACCO working conditions and reduce unsustainable reliance on individual staff, and
- the continued impact of colonisation on child removal and leaving care practice are acknowledged, with DFFH and Aboriginal Communities collaborating in the addressing the systemic racism within practice.

Overall, the findings from this project reveal a leaving care system where positive Aboriginal care leaver outcomes depend on aligning cultural safety, relational practice, and care leaver agency and self-determination with a more cohesive and reliable structural foundation. Improving experiences and outcomes for care leavers will require a system that acts in their genuine best interests, one which provides Aboriginal care leavers

with stability, cultural connection, and legitimate voice and choice rather than expecting them to succeed despite systemic barriers and unaddressed trauma.

5. Recommendations

To support meaningful reform of the leaving care system within Victoria, the following recommendations, developed in collaboration with the project working group, are put forward.

1. Government develop and implement policies and strategies to reform the Victorian leaving care system to:
    a. Extend the age limit for all leaving care supports and funding, not just Transition to Independent Living Allowance, from 21 to 25 years, aligning with definitions of youth.
    b. Convert from age-based to gradual ability-based leaving care transitions, ensuring care leavers have the skills and supports they need before they leave care.
    c. Extend all leaving care supports to voluntary placement care leavers and care leavers that have reunified with their parents.
    d. Ensure that funding and targets match the number of care leavers, ensuring that all care leavers have equal access to support and that all Aboriginal care leavers have the opportunity to receive leaving care services delivered by an ACCO.
    e. Commence leaving care planning earlier (e.g., from 12 years-old), allowing for greater planning opportunities.
    f. Extend funding of care programs (e.g., kinship care) to offer extended support (i.e., post-care support) to care leavers.
    g. Support service and system co-design with care leavers.
2. Government, in collaboration with DFFH, develop and implement policies and strategies to prevent, address and monitor racism at individual, organisation and systemic levels within the leaving care system.
3. Government strengthen shared accountability for care leaver outcomes, including measures to reduce power imbalances between ACCOs and Government, support equitable partnerships and strengthen Aboriginal-led decision-making in line with the Supporting Stable and Strong Families legislation.
4. Government increase investment in the leaving care workforce and invest in an Aboriginal-led redesign of the leaving care system, including the Better Futures program.
5. Government increase investment in family finding and genograms for Aboriginal children and young people in care. This includes expansion of family finding services to enable family finding and reunification at all stages of care journeys.
6. DFFH, in partnership with ACCOs, develop a clear and actionable step-by-step guide for staff to follow when supporting care leavers and improve role clarity.
7. ACCOs recognise and prioritise skill building of care leavers who desire to become future mentors and join the care workforce.
8. ACCOs strengthen their workforce capabilities by embedding ongoing opportunities for staff to engage in reflective practice with upper management and participate in training opportunities.

9. Government increase investment in services designed to reduce DFFH intervention and increase family healing services.
10. DFFH bolster the implementation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, including maintaining and supporting Aboriginal children and young peoples connect to culture and family and the critical role that accurate and up-to-date culturally relevant documentation plays in this.
11. DFFH, in collaboration with Government, strengthen accountability for completion and following of processes to properly prepare children and young people in care for leaving care (e.g., connection to family and culture maintained, teaching financial literacy, etc.), and ensuring care leavers have access to their key documentation (e.g., birth certificates and assessments).
12. DFFH implement state-wide mechanisms to ensure consistent DFFH practice, supported by mandatory, ongoing cultural awareness and anti-racism training for all DFFH staff, to strengthen culturally safe and responsive decision-making across the leaving care system.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Desktop review



Appendix 1.pdf

Appendix 2 – Community conversation questions



Appendix 2.pdf

Appendix 3 – Community conversation summary



Appendix 3.pdf

Appendix 4 – Staff community conversation feedback



Appendix 4.pdf