



Government of South Australia

Office of the Guardian  
for Children and Young People

## Making our state a better parent

### South Australia's Strategic Plan 2010 Consultation

The 2010 update of South Australia's Strategic Plan is a great opportunity to pay more attention to children and specifically to children in state care for whom we have a special responsibility.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the revision of the plan and to contribute to it.

Following is this Office's vision and ideas for strengthening the plan by adding a target *specific to children in care*.

This Office is also keen to see other targets that act to prevent children from coming into care.

I would like to be involved in any subsequent discussion about targets for children and young people, and offer assistance in refining the proposals in this submission.

**Pam Simmons**  
**Guardian**  
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## The vision

South Australia is a place where all children have the opportunity to be the best they can, to reach their potential and achieve their goals.

## Including children who are in care

*If you dress really nicely, people don't believe you're in foster care. They expect you to be one type of person, not well presented or well adjusted. They expect you to be stuffed up. [GCYP 2007]*

Children and young people in [state] care are achievers. They overcome disadvantage to be strong and sure. They need our help to be the best they can.

*It's not just having no parents – that's just the start of it. We have to deal with the government and social workers and lots of other people and bullying. [GCYP 2007]*

We have a special responsibility for children in care. Their parents are unable to care for them safely and the court has decided that the state must act as parent, by arranging care and decision-making. The state is not a good parent. The responsibility for them is shared among many and the potential for disagreement and tension is high. Amidst this imperfect and sometimes fractured parenting is the child, who will bear the costs of arguments, delays, moving, and disregard.

*My teacher never gave up on me. I told him I was in care and he said – do it [homework] over lunch and bring it to me at the end of the day. If they don't give up on you, you don't give up on you. [GCYP 2007]*

If we want to be a place where all children have opportunity, we will pay attention to those who are most disadvantaged. Measures of literacy, further education, training, income source and homelessness, which are all tracked in the SA strategic planning process, tell us that some groups of young South Australians could benefit from targets specific to them. Children in care, of whom one in four are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children, are one of these groups.

*Nobody asked when I left whether I had someone to talk to. I was homeless at the time so there was nobody. [GCYP 2008]*

The seven in a thousand South Australian children who require ongoing 'state' parenting, are the test of the state's resolve to "create opportunity for our people... and ensure that our citizens and our state thrive".

## Children in care are not a homogenous group

*I couldn't concentrate as I worried about my brothers and sisters in other foster homes. [GCYP 2007]*

Children and young people in care are not a homogenous group. They have different abilities, dreams and circumstances. However, they do share a history of loss and often trauma. They have to negotiate and seek out the things that most children take for granted, such as new families, different rules, written plans about them, privacy, seeing brothers and sisters, keeping personal things safe and new schools.

There are now over 2,500 children in care, including those in temporary care and secure custody. Of those on care and protection court orders (2,306), 85 per cent are on long term orders until they reach the age of 18. There are slightly more boys than girls, at 53 per cent. One in four is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. About 80 are unaccompanied refugee minors. The Department of Education reports that at term 3 2009, 34 per cent had a significant learning impairment.

## We need targeted intervention

*I can talk to my worker about anything and she is there to arrange stuff for me. [GCYP 2009]*

Without considered intervention the prospects for children in care are not as bright as they could be or as positive as their peers who are not in care.<sup>1</sup>

About one third of young women who have been in care are pregnant or have a child before they reach the age of 20. A disproportionate number of all care leavers will experience homelessness and frequent moves. Care leavers are more likely to use, and sometimes abuse, drugs and alcohol. A significant number of care leavers have serious mental health disorders. And a disproportionate number are in young offender facilities or adult prisons.

This is not to say that they are more inclined to poor life outcomes; but rather that ongoing emotional trauma, inadequate support while in care, and accelerated and insufficiently planned moves to independence make poor outcomes so much more likely.

A Victorian analysis of the economic cost to state governments from the leaving care population group compared to the general population over a lifetime showed a cost difference of \$738,741 per person. The biggest costs were associated with police, justice and correctional services.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The evidence here is not fully referenced. Further information can be found at [www.gcyp.sa.gov.au](http://www.gcyp.sa.gov.au). For a summary, see Mendes, P and Moslehuddin, B 2006 'From Dependence to Interdependence: Towards Better Outcomes for Young People Leaving State Care', *Child Abuse, Review* vol.15, pp. 110-126.

<sup>2</sup> Forbes, C, Inder, B and Raman, S 2006 'Measuring the cost of leaving care in Victoria', *Children Australia*, vol. 31, n. 3, pp. 26-33.

## SA has started well

*They said they didn't know the answer but bring it to the office and they did it with me. [GCYP, 2007]*

South Australia has done well in so many ways in looking after children in care. We are building a more robust alternative care system, we have individual education plans for students, and post-care services for care leavers. In the school retention strategy, commenced by the Social Inclusion Unit in 2004, children in care were a priority group and they have benefited from ongoing support. The commitment to provide priority access to government services is the envy of other states and territories. The Dame Roma Mitchell Trust Fund provides grants for things that parents often pay for. The commitment of the workforce and carers is huge.

With the review and reinvigoration of *South Australia's Strategic Plan* there is the opportunity to capitalise on these efforts by choosing this group of young South Australians for special attention. We could be a state that takes seriously its parenting obligations and celebrates its children's achievements.

## What this could look like in the plan

### Objective 6: Expanding Opportunity

#### Target: Children in care wellbeing

Exceed the Australian average for wellbeing of children and young people in out of home care, as indicated by educational achievement, stability, and successful transition to adulthood.

#### Key measures

Please note: These are suggestions only and have not been confirmed with the proposed sources. The data is available. It is also possible to reduce the number of indicators without seriously compromising confidence in the measurement.

#### 1. Education

*It's easier to be thought of as trouble rather than stupid. [GCYP 2007]*

Participation in pre-school [source: DECS]

Years 3 – 9 literacy and numeracy rates [source: DECS]

SACE completion rates [source: DECS]

Participation in higher education [source: DFEEST]

#### 2. Wellbeing

*The worst thing is having no friends. [GCYP 2007]*

AEDI data [source: DECS]

Home stability [source: DFC]

Mental health [source: DFC and SA Health]

Participation in decisions [source: DFC and Office of the Guardian]

Regular contact with their social worker [source: DFC]

Knowledge of cultural identity [source: DFC]

### **Moving to adulthood**

*Being told at 18 that you are on your own isn't my idea of a celebration.*  
[GCYP 2007]

[Reduction in] Use of homelessness services [source: Housing SA]

Significant safe relationships [source: Office of the Guardian]

Employment or education participation at age 18 [source: DFC]

Transition planning [source: DFC]

## **The last word**

**Posted to the SAPlan conversation page, 21 September 2010**

### *The right response not just a rapid response*

As a former young person in care, it would be a fantastic opportunity for some light to be shed on what we as a state are doing for young people in care and how we are tracking at improving their health and wellbeing, education and opportunities to participate in society.

I wholeheartedly endorse a specific target for children and young people in care so that dedicated attention and resources can be ascertained to ensure that we are looking after are most marginalised members of our society.

Children and young people in care should be given the same opportunities as all other children and young people in our state and it's important that this is facilitated to enable them to learn, grow, develop and participate.

Rather than just a quick-fix, we would all benefit as a state for a more wholistic and long-term approach to how we support our children and young people in care.