

Housing Allowance

The Housing Allowance supports young people to find and maintain a broader range of housing options. Young people are supported by their Coach to develop a housing pathway plan and apply for funding to support a safe, stable and affordable housing option.

The allowance supports shared housing, student housing, or can be used to negotiate tenure to live with people in their Support Circle who were not foster carers but can provide an appropriate housing option. It does not duplicate or replace existing financial supports around housing, nor can it be used to further subsidise homelessness services or public housing.

The allowance is negotiated individually, and the Coach works to develop young person's skills and knowledge about housing through the application and review process, as well as helping them make informed choices about the safety and stability of their housing options.

Why is it important?

Young people need support to access and maintain housing

Access to stable and safe housing is a fundamental human right; a critical foundation for young people to build a positive future. Care leavers who have self selected living arrangements, leaving residential care, or moving on from foster care must have access to additional support and resources to find safe and stable housing.

Housing for young people in private rental is unaffordable and often unobtainable

The Rental Affordability Snapshot 2021 found that there were 0 properties in WA affordable for young people living on Youth Allowance. While shared housing and living with extended family are common pathways for young people living independently for the first time, these are often supported and/or subsidised by family. The current federal subsidies are not able to support young people in shared housing, or sufficiently assist them to afford student housing.

It maintains and grows connection to community

Young people should be supported to find and secure housing options that maintain or strengthen their support circles, connection to community and allow them to continue education and employment. The current youth homelessness system requires young people to relocate away from their networks as they cycle through a stepped system of care.

Creates a new mechanism to expand choice and housing options

There is no current equivalent to the Housing Allowance in WA, even for young people under 18. The Supported Rental Pathway Pilot is focused on establishing longer term tenancies in private rentals, and does not provide support to more flexible options. The NSW Youth Rent Choice Program, and the Victorian Accommodation Allowance have both informed the development of the prototype.

What has been developed and tested?

Housing Allowance - A flexible support package for young people to develop the skills, knowledge and experience of finding and securing a variety of housing options. Housing options are linked to longer term goals in different life domains, and a housing pathway plan and budget must be developed through the process. The Housing Allowance application pack has been created to be accessible, but also includes sufficient checks and balances to prevent misuse. It includes tools for young people to make decisions about the safety, affordability and stability of housing options.

Practice Tools and Resources

- Housing Allowance Model Framework
- Housing Allowance Fact Sheet
- Housing Allowance Application Form
- Safe & Stable Housing Discussion Guide
- Housing Pathway Planner
- Housing Budget Planner
- Housing Allowance Payment Contract
- Housing Allowance Practice Principles

What have we learned?

Safe and Stable Housing Must Be Prioritised

The provision of financial and practical supports around housing are a critical priority for Home Stretch services. The lack of affordable housing options for young people in WA, and a Homelessness system that fails to provide sufficient options for care leavers with more complex support needs requires further action at a system level. Programs like LIFT [Indigo Junction] and the Housing First models provide a clear example of what is required, and would need to be integrated into Home Stretch services to effectively support care leavers.

The allowance must be conditional on engaging in support, but access to support must be unconditional

Young people need to be positively engaged in support for the Coach to reliably support and complete a Housing Allowance application. The Transition Coach provides ongoing support and assistance should issues emerge in the living arrangement, and the young person needs or chooses to move on. The allowance is accessible to the young person, not fixed to the property. This is consistent with the Housing First approach, and an important opportunity to test an adaptation of the housing and homelessness system towards a more effective response.

A focus on developing Support Circles open up opportunities for brokering supported housing options

The lack of housing options means Transition Coaches need to be creative in supporting young people to explore a broader range of options. While yet to be fully tested, there are some early indications that young people might be able to explore reconnecting with historic care arrangements or to undertake family finding to build their support circles. A possible outcome of reconnecting with supports is opportunities for brokering stable and supported living arrangements. Many young people return to live with their biological family, even before they reach 18. Further co-design with biological families is needed to understand how to support these arrangements.

Staying On and Housing Allowance share similar principles and practice approaches

The Staying On agreement tools support living arrangements to work in a shared housing option with supportive friends, family or other members of their support circle. The tools are useful where the young person needs to abide by set expectations or conditions of living in the arrangement, or the young person needs assistance to advocate their needs or rights.

Empowering young people with the right to make choices allows for failure and learning but creates a difficult tension

While young people are able to make informed choices about their living arrangements, those who have experienced trauma and domestic violence can find it difficult to make accurate risk assessments posed by certain situations and living arrangements. Transition Coaches work in a transparent way to ensure young people make informed choices, and have the dignity of managing their own risk, but there are ethical issues with financially supporting young people to live in housing options that place them at risk.



I'd been kicked out of every crisis accommodation and housing program. The biggest thing that Home Stretch has helped me with is finding a home for me and my son.
Young Person

The housing allowance means the young person can afford to live and study at university. It gives her the best chance to complete her studies in a highly supported environment.

Transition Coach

We want my sister to live here, but we can't afford it on all of our incomes. A housing subsidy will mean we can afford it and help her until she is ready to move out.

Relative

WHAT DO WE RECOMMEND HAPPENS NEXT?

PRACTICE

Further testing of the model in the trial - The model is yet to be fully tested and operationalised in the Home Stretch WA Trial. We recommended continued testing to collect evidence with a focus on young people transitioning out of residential care from 15.

Collaboration and sharing practice and learnings with Victorian Accommodation Allowance model - The Victorian implementation of Home Stretch has occurred on a larger scale, and there are opportunities to learn from their implementation and scaling.

POLICY

Establish a mechanism for the payment of Housing Allowances - Currently, the only mechanism is through brokerage payment protocols administered by Anglicare WA. The development and testing of a process for a Housing Allowance payment through the Dept of Communities should be explored and tested. Some Child Protection workers have found ways to provide ongoing funding for housing by subsidising other living costs on an ongoing basis. The process must be flexible and not stigmatising for young people.

Housing a Priority Focus Area in the Rapid Response Agreement Framework - The framework needs to contain clear policy direction around priority access to social and public housing options for care leavers.

Agreement between State and Federal governments around impact on Centrelink Payments - There are individually negotiated exemptions for subsidised housing. At a larger scale, an agreement must be reached to ensure young people do not have their income support payments affected by a Housing Allowance.

SYSTEM

Alignment with Housing Choices, Supported Rental Pathways and other housing programs - While the two models are distinct, there is an opportunity to understand the intersection, and whether priority access may be brokered for care leavers aged 16-21. The additional supports and resources available through Transition Coaches provide the critical supports needed to ensure young people can sustain these options.

Exploring feasibility and viability of Housing Allowance to support residential care extensions - In other jurisdictions, Staying Near or Staying Close are options for care leavers to move into independent housing close to residential care facilities. This allows them to continue to access supports and maintain relationships with residential care staff. Indigo Junction, St John of God and Anglicare WA have developed similar models in their homelessness services.

Invest In Me Funding

The 'right' to access a visible and secure financial safety net to attain resources that support a young person towards their aspirations and goals, as well as relief in times of crisis.

Invest In Me Funding provides young people with enhanced access to financial resources as part of supporting their transition from 18–21. The financial resource is administrated by the Home Stretch Team who have direct access and delegated authority to approve spending to support young people.

Young people who are supported by the Home Stretch WA Trial are currently allocated \$7,000 per annum towards their individual Invest In Me budget. Young people are redirected to access financial support through the Home Stretch WA Trial, rather than returning to a District Office for financial support.

Why is it important?

The current discretionary system fails to provide a consistent safety net for young people

One of the main challenges raised by young people in the co-design activities was consistent and reliable access to financial support and resources from the Department. District Offices are not resourced to provide the necessary after care support to assist with financial requests. Decisions are often made in a reactive and subjective way, and can largely depend on how well known the young person is in the office they visit. There is no current resourcing in most District Offices to provide the necessary support to respond to young people's requests.

Legislation and the Case Practice Manual provide flexibility but lack clarity

There is a need for a more intentional approach in supporting young people, one that provides scaffolding for workers to make more informed decisions about the nature and level of support they provide each young person. Across districts there are a variety of approaches to making decisions about funding requests, and there are consistent practices and approaches upheld by some teams, but these are largely tacit knowledge. Assistant District Directors hold significant influence in deciding how leaving care funding is allocated.

The system can sometimes reinforce dependence over interdependence

The inconsistent approach to provision of leaving care funds has resulted in a range of different strategies and behaviours employed by young people and support workers. Many young people and support workers go 'district shopping', support workers take over advocacy based on the assumption that young people won't be successful. There are a range of values and attitudes regarding access to leaving care funds which further reinforces dependence and learned helplessness. This includes teaching young people to 'get everything they can out of the Department', or the inclusion of a broad range of costs in a 'Leaving Care Plan' to ensure that young people have the option for financial support. These approaches are in conflict with a broader aim of building young people's interdependence beyond the specialist Child Protection system resources. The current system can be a barrier for young people building self-reliance and engagement with mainstream services.



Being supported to get into TAFE and get a smartrider was good, I couldn't afford it so it would've stopped me going. My Coach is easy to get in touch with too. I get frustrated when other workers don't pick up or wait days to get back to me.
Young Person

What has been developed and tested?

- Invest In Me Practice Guidelines and reference tools to govern the use of funding, and support Coaches to make consistent decisions.
- Practice principles that were defined in the co-design and have been further developed and refined over the trial.
- Bulk application processes to assist the digital and physical forms and processes to enable applications.

Practice Tools and Resources

- Practice Guidelines
- Young Person Decision Making Tool
- Coach Decision Making Tool

What have we learned?

'Chipping in' and contributing to costs – an important but challenging principle to implement

In order to access funding and support through the Invest In Me prototype, young people are encouraged to make a personal contribution towards the payment of expenses they seek funding for. These contributions are individually negotiated and are not always financial, young people having the capacity to contribute through other means or actions consistent with achieving their goals. This approach is in contrast to the experiences of many young people from the Youth Advisory Group who reported they are usually supported with the full payment of costs towards expenses, or the rejection of their request for funding. This all or nothing approach is not consistent with the experiences of young people outside of the care system.

Scaffolding towards financial independence and self-reliance

While there is a need for better access to financial support for young people as they transition to independence, the approach to providing support must also focus on building their capacity, skills and knowledge when they seek financial assistance. This requires both the time of a skilled worker with a clear, consistent framework for funding and an administrative process that allows for rapid responses to funding requests.

The majority of expenses relate to education costs

An effective Rapid Response Framework could significantly reduce the financial burden on the Department of Communities for post care discretionary funding and access to support. The largest costs incurred by Invest in Me throughout the trial were for education and training to provide pathways to employment. This was common across most young people in the trial.

Financial Support needs to include pathways to support young people to understand, consolidate and manage their debt.

For a number of young people in the Home Stretch WA Trial, the burden of financial debt incurred through impulsive decisions made when they were younger. The debt was a significant source of ongoing stress and a barrier to moving forward in their lives. This is evident in the cohort of young people who engaged with Home Stretch at the age of 19 or older, where there had been limited access to support to deal with financial problems after they left care.

One young person was finding Home Stretch's approach to financial support challenging; they just wanted payments to be made without having to 'chip in' towards costs. The young person's frustration and feelings were validated by the Coach, but they continued to support the young person in a consistent and persistent manner.

After working together for 4 months, they contacted their Coach with a plan for studying and worked out what they could contribute from their own income towards costs, asking for Home Stretch to 'chip in' the rest.

WHAT DO WE RECOMMEND HAPPENS NEXT?

PRACTICE

Further refinement and expansion of the Invest In Me Practice Framework as part of scaling Home Stretch - Need for training and practice guidelines for services providing Home Stretch Offer.

Review the Invest in Me principles and practice developed as a reference for practice guidelines for Leaving Care Teams and others making decisions about funding for young people from the age of 15

We need to consider how to incorporate financial planning as part of supports provided throughout the leaving care pathway from 15 years

Development of youth friendly resources that describe and define how decisions are made about funding, and the pathway to escalate or challenge decisions

Online and digital portals for young people to make requests for funding - Incorporating a structure to build skills and capacity through the process.

POLICY

Improvements to data tracking for Leaving Care Fund usage by Child Protection districts

Development of policy to support consistent practice around decision making in the use of leaving care funding, particularly in regards to needs identified in the Leaving Care Plan. This is increasingly important with the current amendments suggested for the Children and Communities Act 2004

SYSTEM

Delegated authority for use of brokerage funds to Home Stretch service providers - An explicit framework is required for decision making in contracts and a recognition of the administrative burden.

Resourcing of an appropriate Leaving Care Team function in all Child Protection districts to manage funding requests after 18

An online portal for young people to update their details with CPFS

Undertake a co-design and reform of how leaving care funding is accessed in the system post 21 - Development of an accessible system and transparent process which builds interdependence and self-reliance.

Staying On

Under the Home Stretch WA Trial, young people and carers have the option to continue their stable living arrangements until the young person turns 21. There is a continuation of payments and support to foster and family carers and an expectation that the young person contribute to their living expenses from their independent income (Centrelink, employment etc.).

As part of their support and advocacy role, Home Stretch WA Transition Coaches assist young people to develop and maintain agreements with their foster or family carers and the Department of Communities. The agreement establishes the expectations, payments and conditions of staying on in a stable living arrangement until they are ready to leave or up to the age of 21.

Why is it important?

Many young people aren't ready and cannot afford to move out at 18; and leaving a stable environment can have a serious negative impact

It forces them to move from their support networks, training and employment, education that removes the safe and stable environment.

Young people value stability, support and connection, but want to be respected as a young adult

Many young people and carers felt the Staying On agreement empowered young adults with rights and responsibilities within their family or living arrangement. They also valued the direct ongoing support of the Coach promoting interdependence.

Paying a Staying On subsidy provides stability in the living arrangement

While many young people continued to live with foster or family carers in Western Australia without the payment of a subsidy, early insights suggest the subsidy is a critical foundation for ensuring the stability of living arrangements past 18. It is particularly important for young people who are studying, and unable to contribute financially to living costs, and those transitioning to support from the NDIS after turning 18.

What has been developed and tested?

Staying On agreements - A practice approach to supporting families and young people to agree how they can be supported and continue the living arrangement. The agreement includes: practice guide; payment process and forms; information resources for foster carers and young people; policy recommendations about eligibility, payment rates and approval; and a toolkit for workers to negotiate agreements.

Prototype Practice Development

- Staying On Blueprint
- Home Stretch Staying On booklet
- Staying On agreement form
- Staying On Subsidy application form
- Staying On agreement how to and discussion guide Card Sort Tool
- Home Stretch housing pathways guide and checklist
- Rights & Responsibilities of Young People and Carers in a Staying On agreement

What have we learned?

Staying On agreement support must be highly individualised to respect and strengthen the existing family relationships

In functioning families, the agreement is about validating and celebrating the strengths of the family. 'Carer', 'subsidy' and 'agreement' language can be stigmatising if not handled sensitively. The intervention must be planned and have sensitivity to each family and their individual dynamics.

Regular support and structured reviews of the agreement and subsidy are an important part of the model

The structure of formal reviews and regular informal contact is helpful to identify issues in the living arrangement and identify potential support needs for the carer, family and the young person. It provides opportunities to celebrate what is going well, significant milestones and supports the Transition Coach to maintain engagement with young people who are struggling.

Staying On agreements support a young person's home, not just the room they are sleeping in that night

Staying On secures a stable home for young people, allowing them to explore and over time test independent living options. When young people spend time away from a Staying On arrangement, perhaps exploring 'idealised' relationships with biological family members or testing out living with a partner or friends, it is important the young person feels they can come home, for as long as they see it as their home.

Communicating the choice to Stay On must happen early

Carers make significant financial or personal choices based on their expectations of what happens after 18. Information about the option must be provided early and in small chunks to allow families and carers to plan for the long term. The application should be made at 17, allowing time between 17 1/2 to 18 to explore housing options if things have changed, or negotiate a shorter Staying On agreement after 18 to help a young person finish education or find another positive housing option.

It's no longer a 'placement' but a supported 'agreement' made by a young adult and their carer

Clearly articulating the Home Stretch support offer, and the rights and responsibilities of young people and carers is important, both within families and the system. Young people are increasingly the focus of the support after 18, but support to carers must also be signposted.

The separation of the Coordinator and Transition Coach role is important

Whilst it is important for the Transition Coach to have knowledge of the family systems, the separation of the Staying On roles allow separation of support as needed, particularly when the support needs of the carer impact the work of the Transition Coach and vice versa. This is very important for young people receiving NDIS support.

Negotiation of the subsidy rate and young person's contribution is a vital but difficult part of the agreement. Creating equity and meeting the needs of individuals and families is a crucial consideration.

Young people and carers in the trial were strongly supportive of the young person chipping in to costs as it builds self reliance and capacity. Negotiating the contribution and subsidy rate on a case by case level achieves the most learning for the young person, but also takes time and can impact their relationship. **Clear guidelines and conditions for Staying On subsidies must be in place to ensure young people are not exploited.** It may not be possible at a system level to individually negotiate payment rates.

Aboriginal families require a culturally informed understanding of living arrangements

Flexibility and adaption to the Staying On model is required to ensure the appropriate support of young Aboriginal people to live within the family, but also clarity to ensure financially supporting the young person's living arrangement is the priority of the subsidy payment.



The Staying On agreement has allowed me to feel more like one of the family and like I have a place to be after 18.

Young Person

I'm so glad to know he'll have support when he turns 18 too... It's always on my mind...What's going to happen when he turns 18? How am I going to afford this? I'm so glad it is happening, it's wonderful news.

Carer

The carer provides support with a safe home, food, support and occasionally clothing. The young person mainly provides for themselves through their own income.

Transition Coach

WHAT DO WE RECOMMEND HAPPENS NEXT?

PRACTICE

Staying On is not a standalone service - Many young people choose to explore connections with biological family, or attempt to move out after they reach 18. Transition Coaches play a critical support role to assist with choices and a pathway to stable housing if things don't work.

Staying On Practice Framework - We recommend review and refinement by a working group and tested specifically with a larger group of young people transitioning to NDIS to assess whether the needs of carers can be met by the model.

Training for facilitating Staying On agreements - Training provided to individuals involved in expanding the Home Stretch offer. A community of practice assists the development of practice knowledge to support expansion of the model.

POLICY

Department of Communities create policy to support practice developed in the trial - The right for young people to be supported to Stay On must be clearly defined in policy to ensure it is a right and not a discretion. Policy must now be created to support practice, and not redefine practice based on system need.

Subsidy rates fixed and set by the system - Rates reduce over the 3 years to encourage greater financial contribution by young people. There is a process for seeking exemption to the reduction on a case by case basis, and the ability to negotiate amounts when appropriate.

Staying On becomes available to historic carers who are willing to support a young adult to return

SYSTEM

Carer's support is resourced in the model - The addition of a full time Staying On Coordinator role to support carers and negotiate agreements across a region (up to 30 families per Coordinator). Opportunities to extend access to 21 from programs that provide therapeutic support to foster carers like Woon-yah Ngullah Goorlangass, should be considered.

Develop a Staying On Carer Recruitment Program - Recruit new carers specifically interested in supporting 16-21 year olds working or studying.

Staying On carers have the same access to the supports of 0-18 carers; like counselling Staying On practice applied by different service providers, and adapted to their context

Support Circles

Support Circles is a practice lens applied to all aspects of Home Stretch. Almost every intervention has incorporated an intentional focus on understanding how extended support can enhance a young person's connection to people, places, culture and community.

Transition Coaches approach their work with young people from a Support Circle lens, integrating a trauma informed approach that focuses on the Coaching relationship as a positive and reliable relationship that can be used to help a young person heal, and with support to grow confidence and skills in connecting with new relationships or revisiting old connections.

Support Circles is also about helping a young person to map out and understand their biological family, and to explore reconnecting if and when they are ready.

*The original co-design sprint identified the potential for testing a model of practice that supported young people to bring together and meet regularly with a group of mentors chosen from their networks. There was little interest from young people in the trial to test this approach, and the Youth Advisory Group largely rejected it as a desirable option.

Why is it important?

Interdependence over Independence

Research literature on care leavers highlight supporting young people to develop an enduring connection to people, community and culture is a critical factor in their successful transition to adulthood. Systems of care can provide the scaffolding for connection, commitment to building an enduring network beyond the leaving care continuum is needed.

Relational trauma and the impact of the care experience

Many young people experienced significant relational trauma creating barriers to help seeking, forming and maintaining trusting relationships. These challenges when viewed developmentally, require an approach to support that is delivered through a consistent, persistent, reliable and hope inducing relationship. The Transition Coach relationship may be an important point of healing and cultural support resulting in young people developing healthier views of relationships and good boundaries.

Culture and knowledge of self is built through relationships

Many young people are disconnected and removed from their family, and deprived of an understanding and connection to their heritage and culture. Efforts to achieve this through generic 'Cultural Plans' overlook the importance of relationships and understanding identity and place in family to knowing culture and community.

What has been developed and tested?

Support Circles - A focus on support circles is integrated into all of the work of the Transition Coach. It provides a lens in which all interventions are considered.

Early and consistent use of **Eco-mapping, genograms** and other practice tools support young people to visually map out their connections.

Family finding and mapping of relationships has been supported through Yorganop.

Appropriate usage of **Invest In Me** funding to support young people to develop interpersonal and social skills, and access opportunities and activities which build their networks.



My Coach helped me reconnect with my old foster carers who I hadn't seen since I was 16. They even helped set it up so I can live with them again and they get a payment.
19 Year Old Young Person

There is a lot more need for family and systems work and knowledge than you would expect in a youth work role.

Transition Coach

I find it hard to ask for help sometimes and I appreciate my Coach always staying in touch even when I don't answer.

Young Person

What have we learned?

An empowerment approach supports young people to become interdependent, not dependent

'Interdependence' is used over 'Independence', it accurately reflects one of the key outcomes Home Stretch aims to achieve, connection to strong and stable natural networks to support them beyond their contact with systems of care. The intentionality of extending the leaving care planning and support phase to 21 provides an important opportunity to encourage and support young people's emerging independence.

Reciprocity and an option to giving back is important

The Youth Advisory Group has provided a critical foundation for the development of the Home Stretch model. One of the unintended but important outcomes from the group is the opportunity for young people to make meaning of their care experiences with other care leavers, and have their experiences and ideas validated by their peers.

Balancing a Youth Work Approach with a family and system lens is important

The primary focus of the Transition Coach is to work directly with the young person, rather than work systemically with family networks. This is important to ensure young people are being empowered and the work is appropriately focused on the relationship with the young person. There has emerged a need for capacity within Home Stretch Teams to think systemically, and to understand practices and principles specific to family finding and reunification. This is coupled with a strongly trauma informed practice approach by Transition Coaches to ensure young people are provided scaffolding, safety and choice around decisions to build their natural networks.

Family finding and reunification with biological family

Many young people return to explore their connection to biological family once they age out of the care system, including young people who were previously in stable and secure placements. Despite a desktop literature review and exploration of current practices in WA and other jurisdictions, limited practice support is available to guide the support of young adults leaving care who wish to find and reconnect with biological family. 'Who's My Mob' and youth homelessness reconnect services provide some evidence and indication of useful practices approaches, which should be investigated further.

An understanding of Support Circles needs to be carried out and recorded throughout an individual's care experience

Young people often leave care with a limited understanding of their own journey, and the people and places important to it. This is particularly apparent for young people with experiences of multiple placements. Where it has been possible, a handover of historical and current supports resulted in better connection and understanding.

WHAT DO WE RECOMMEND HAPPENS NEXT?

PRACTICE

Establishment of Youth Advisory Groups for each Home Stretch region with strategies for including diverse voices

Development of a Support Circles Practice Framework

Support Circles – Long term understanding - Collaboration with concurrent co-design work by Parkerville.

Family Finding and Reunification for Young Adults Co-design an approach to supporting young adults to reconnect with biological family members including co-design with parents and families who have had children taken into care.

POLICY

Alignment of case practice approaches around Leaving Care Planning to strengthen focus on Support Circles

Recruitment of staff - Home Stretch Teams recruit to balance skills in youth work and more systemic approaches such as family and community workers.

Strengthening of Department of Communities policies and practices around natural supports - Included are resources for maintaining contact with siblings, extended families and friends, recording information about natural networks and supports, and sharing information as part of transitioning between care arrangements.

SYSTEM

Workforce Development Strategy - Reinvigorate systems and natural network thinking with education and training, while emphasising approaches to respond to relational trauma. This should be undertaken at all ages and stages.

Access to camps and recreational activities for care leavers a system resource, not an agency or program specific resource - Camps run for care leavers expanded to invite all care leavers to participate.

Peer Worker roles in Leaving Care - Young people in the Youth Advisory Group strongly advocated for peer support/navigator roles to be established.

Add a Staying On Coordinator role to a Home Stretch Team - With a focus on working with families to develop and support Staying On agreements. The scope for this role would also provide family reunification and family mapping supports.

A Smooth Transition

Supporting young people and carers to understand, make an informed choice, and access the Home Stretch offer. Key elements include:

- Continuity of support and care into the post care system, a shared care approach from the age of 17 ½ to 18
- Accessible pathways for young people to exercise their return to extended support and rebuild their Leaving Care Plan and support circles.
- Support to understand their rights to access ongoing support after 21
- Updating leaving care plans between 18-21 to identify contemporary support needs of the young person

Why is it important?

There is a significant drop off in the level of support once they reach 18

Simplistic chronological triggers and age thresholds which drive the bureaucratic transitioning of young people from state care, are incongruous with research evidence, practitioner wisdom and the voices and experience of young people. Young people need a developmentally appropriate support system which recognises their need for a gradual transition, and helps build skills, knowledge and connection to community.

Many young people living in residential care disengage from the Child Protection system at 15, but return to District Offices for assistance after 18

A necessary feature of extended support to young people is accessible pathways for young people to return to intensive support. Many young people disengage from the care system during the critical period allocated to leaving care planning, only to return as adults after 18 seeking support and connection.

Young people have usually experienced relational trauma; we need to build epistemic trust* and relationships over time

The impacts of childhood trauma are seen in young people's reluctance to engage in help seeking, or to form trusted relationships with helpful adults. An approach where young people are warmly introduced to additional supports over time, through someone they trust is critical to brokering post care supports and relationships. For Aboriginal families and young people, trust is also strongly connected to safe organisations known and vouched for by family members and community.

Emphasis is placed on completing a 'Leaving Care Plan' before 18

Many young people are not developmentally ready to engage in longer term planning, and the system's current reliance on a Leaving Care Plan before 18 to define their support needs is unrealistic and ineffective in meeting their needs. While there have been suggested amendments proposed to the Children and Communities Act, they are yet to be legislated and implemented in practice.

Leaving care service referrals completed at 15 cannot create an extension of support

The Case Practice Manual currently specifies young people should be referred to leaving care services at 15. Information provided at this age is not useful or relevant, referrals are often rushed and made without the young person's involvement, circumstances and contact details change between 15-18. Young people are not making informed choices about engaging in post care supports.

Absence of a planned continuum of care from 15-25

The current post care system lacks intentionality in design, and relies on a fragmented and inconsistent blend of underfunded and poorly integrated service offers. District Offices do not record post care intervention data, and are unable to track care leavers engagement in funded leaving care services. There is no consistency in practice across supports, and demand management approaches are confusing and often subjective.

What has been developed and tested?

- A range of co-designed resources to communicate the Home Stretch offer across multiple channels – visual, digital, video
- A staged approach to referral and onboarding of young people
- Agreed protocols and approach for shared care from 17 ½ up to 18
- Handover Summary Tool with Guidelines - A tool for young people to articulate their progress with Home Stretch and post care financial support needs. Intended as a supplement to the Leaving Care Plan and developed in a useful format for District Office to make informed decisions about future leaving care funding requests
- Prototype Demand Management System to test 'Right To Return'

Practice Tools and Resources

- Onboarding Service Blueprint
- Handover Summary & Guidelines
- Video/Flyers to communicate service offer

What have we learned?

Trusting relationships between child protection staff and Home Stretch team members are a critical foundation for a smooth transition

Collaboration and coordination of support between the child protection system and community service organisations is strengthened through co-location. Where there are clear communication channels, established relationships between workers, and agreed expectations around roles, young people are more likely to experience a smooth transition of support. This is a foundation for epistemic trust*.

Dedicated Leaving Care workers in District Offices are critical to a continuum of care, the role needs to be clearly defined and resourced

The introduction of Leaving Care teams in some districts allowed the support needs of 15-18 year olds to be prioritised and supported to smoothly engage in post care supports like Home Stretch. In districts without a Leaving Care team, there is greater reliance on assertive follow-up by the Transition Coach to engage. Leaving Care teams are not currently resourced to provide support past 18, but it may suit some young people to have this option. Nitja Nop Yorga Ngulla Mia identified that some young Aboriginal people, planning and preparation for adulthood might need to commence as early as 12 years of age.

Young people and carers need to be provided information about Home Stretch in multiple ways over time

The introduction to Home Stretch information needs to be provided early to young people and families, and it is important to clarify the difference between support provided by Home Stretch and case management provided by Child Protection. Young people must receive information about the service offer directly from a Transition Coach than a CPFS case worker, to provide young people with an informed choice and de-stigmatise the support offer.

Shared care from 17 ½-18 builds engagement with post care supports

Young people supported from 17 ½ demonstrated a stronger and consistent pattern of engagement in the trial, and required less assertive follow-up to engage with their Home Stretch Transition Coach. Involvement from 17 ½ enabled the Coach to participate and support leaving care planning, and be part of celebrations and rituals of transition prior to leaving care. It creates space for continuity in support planning and a warm handover of information about support circles.

Young people need a 'Leaving Care Planner' not a 'Leaving Care Plan'

The ongoing system reliant on a Leaving Care Plan, and the time pressure to ensure all financial needs are clearly defined and described in the plan creates an unhelpful reliance on a static and time limited document. It is largely an attempt to manage a discretionary funding system experienced by young people as inconsistent and subjective. By extending support to plan and develop an adapted Leaving Care Plan handed back to the system at 21, young people are prepared to seek help and communicate post care support needs to a district office.

Some young people return for short than extended episodes of support Young people who find it hard to engage into structured supports often prefer drop in services, where natural relationships can be built over time. Further investigation into creating a Leaving Care Hub after 21 with dedicated staff are needed.

We need young person oriented living documents, which they own, can change and take with them. - Child Protection Frontline Staff

* **Epistemic Trust** - An individual's willingness to consider new knowledge as trustworthy and relevant, and therefore worth integrating into their lives. It has important implications on people's capacity to engage and their expectations of helping relationships.

WHAT DO WE RECOMMEND HAPPENS NEXT?

PRACTICE

Use a multi-channel communication strategy to communicate the Home Stretch offer across the system - Replicate and scale the success of young people scripted videos. Develop Aboriginal specific resources describing post care supports and Home Stretch.

Embedding or co-locating Home Stretch staff in District Offices at various times - Builds epistemic trust* between Transition Coaches and Child Protection Staff.

Alignment of Leaving Care Plan with Handover Summary - Undertake practice development to improve the functionality of the Leaving Care Plan and establish a framework to update and revise the plan beyond 18.

POLICY

Strengthening of Leaving Care Policy and Practice Guidance to integrate the learnings and adaptations needed to implement Home Stretch. Including:

- Practice around adapting/modifying Leaving Care Plans after 18
- Leaving Care Planning for young Aboriginal people commence at 12 years of age
- Shared care approaches between NGO and Dept of Communities staff for under 18's, incorporating learnings from the Towards Independent Adulthood Trial
- Outcomes Framework and Minimum Data set shared across the post care system
- Improvements to data systems to record post care interactions with young people on the ASIST data system
- Communication protocols to share information about which young people are engaging in Home Stretch or leaving care services

SYSTEM

Broader co-design of the Leaving Care Services Continuum of Services to integrate the Home Stretch offer

- Undertake comparative analysis of Leaving Care teams in different districts.
- Resource an appropriate Leaving Care team function with cultural supports in each district office.
- Review of the role, resources and function of leaving care services to provide support from 21-25.
- Further co-design of the Home Stretch prototypes with young people in CSO residential care services, NDIS and regional and remote settings.

A secure online platform for young people to store and access their information, and update contact details for CPFS

Ensure the commissioning of Home Stretch providers is place based partnered with the Aboriginal community, and Aboriginal organisations

Transition Coach

Flexible, one-to-one, individualised support focused on Coaching a young person towards interdependence. The Transition Coach works from a culturally competent, trauma informed, strengths-based approach. Their work is young person driven, and practice is guided by the practice principles co-designed as part of the Home Stretch WA Trial. The Coach connects young people to resources and supports available through the Home Stretch service model and beyond, helping them navigate their journey to interdependence without reinforcing a dependence on the Child Protection system.

Why is it important?

A Smooth Transition - An Intentional System

The Auditor General's Report 2018 into Young People Leaving Care found 65% of young people eligible for leaving care support did not get it early enough or at all. It highlights a system lacking coordination and collaboration, in which Child Protection workers, leaving care providers and other agencies were not effectively communicating and working together to link young people to services. The Department did not know if young people leaving care received the support they need, or what happened to them after they transitioned to post care services.

Young people want continuity and extension of supports, not an extension of 'being in care'

Often the young people who most need extended supports to 21 were wary of the Child Protection system. Young people consulted throughout the co-design process highlighted any offer of 'extended care to 21' must be made available from outside the Child Protection system. They identified perceptions and stigma associated with being 'in care' and remaining connected to a District Office would be a significant barrier for many to engage in extended supports to 21. The findings of 'Nitja Nop Yorga Ngulla Mia' highlighted Aboriginal young people and families would be reluctant to engage in Home Stretch services if they were delivered by the Department.

We need a skilled, culturally competent and capable workforce that young people trust

The nature, quality and strength of the therapeutic relationship between a support worker and a young person is the most critical feature of any successful intervention or approach to support. While there are many motivated and skilled workers in the system, their work tends to occur in isolation or within the context of small teams. The current post care system struggles to apply consistent and evidence informed approaches or frameworks, and there is little scaffolding and support available to develop the workforce. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations have a critical role in service delivery to ensure cultural knowledge, community and healing is intrinsically woven into practice approaches to supporting care leavers.

What has been developed and tested?

- Transition Coaching - Practice principles co-designed with young people. A range of flexible and creative tools to assist a young person to plan and prepare their future across the 8 domains of leaving care.
- An emphasis on building Support Circles, recognising the importance of agency, autonomy, skill development and interdependence.
- Practice frameworks and resources to assist in workforce training.
- A prototype demand management framework with an option to 'Step Back' from intensive support but remain connected.

Practice Tools and Resources

- Transition Coaching Service Blueprint
- Coaching Tools - Mind mapping Activity/8 Domains Card Sort Activity
- Practice Principles - Cards
- Handover Summary - 'Revised Leaving Care Plan'

What have we learned?

Persistence and digital channels to stay connected with young people

'Persistent like a text message, not a knock on the door' is a principle young people acknowledged as key to their ongoing engagement and connection with Transition Coaches. The offer of extended support to 21 includes the Coaches' responsibility to stay connected and assertively follow up young people over the trial period. The use of SMS messaging and other digital services (e.g. Facebook messenger) are critical for regular and consistent communication. A number of young people in the trial commented that knowing the Coach was thinking of them, even though they weren't in a mindset to engage, was highly valued and gave them confidence to return to support.

Experienced, skilled Youth and Social Workers, oriented to Child Protection

The role of a Transition Coach requires a range of skills equivalent in many ways to Child Protection workers; many young people experienced significant and complex trauma requiring a skillful approach to engagement and ongoing support. Young people often present with a range of time critical support needs and require periods of intensive support to manage high levels of risk and safety concerns in their lives. The commissioning of Home Stretch providers, must ensure sufficient resources are available to providers to attract, retain and support qualified and skilled staff.

A commitment to collaboration and shared care

Mirroring key elements of the Care Team approach, Transition Coaches work closely and collaboratively with the young person's primary supports. This includes the Smooth Transition phase from 17½ to 18 and throughout their engagement to connect with services and networks beyond the Child Protection system. As young people reach the age of 20 or choose to opt-out, their rights to access supports until 25 must be clearly communicated. This includes collaborating to create a Handover Summary detailing financial support from the Leaving Care Fund, communicated back to their District Office through a handover. Young people are introduced to other Transition Coaches and Home Stretch team members to build their connection with the program, and to manage staff absences. This is important when a young person has higher support needs, and in the case of young parents where there is a need to provide more specialised supports around parenting and to prioritise the needs of the child as part of the support offer.

Young people who are transient need a consistent Transition Coach

While there are increased demands on travel time and workload management for Transition Coaches, young people who are moving between different locations need the consistency and stability of the same support worker until they stabilise their living arrangement. This is critical for young people with experiences of homelessness, where supports must not be conditional on accommodation or geographic area. This approach is consistent with the principles of Housing First. For young people who move between cities or regions across the State, support can be offered remotely and through digital channels but it is not as effective, the Transition Coach must provide opportunities to link with local place based services.



My Coach has stuck by me, even when I didn't answer messages. Every young person coming out of care should have someone like that.

Youth Advisory Group member & trial participant

Relationships and trust take time

In many cases, the relationship with young people is built over time. Transition Coaches create an engagement plan for young people and describe the need for a unobtrusive 'persistent and reliable approach' and 'the importance of assertive follow up' in order to better engage young people with significant support needs and poor experiences of formal support.

Transition Coaches need to work within a young person's natural networks (Support Circles)

The original co-design highlighted the critical importance of applying a 'Youth Work' approach placing the young person as the primary client. While this remains a key foundation of the Home Stretch approach, there is a need for Transition Coaches to intentionally work from an approach that includes and supports young people to strengthen their relationships with others, and at times support Staying On carers and others to better understand and support the young person. This was evident in a number of Staying On agreements, when supporting young people to reconnect with biological families, and in cases where the young person transitions to NDIS supports.

WHAT DO WE RECOMMEND HAPPENS NEXT?

PRACTICE

- Application of the Home Stretch practice principles as a resource for Home Stretch providers
- Transitioning from Care practice framework development in collaboration with the broader post care services
- Training materials for Transition Coaches - Development of materials to support the scaling of key elements of the Home Stretch service offer.

POLICY

- Transition Coaches in District Offices co-location to improve collaboration
- Youth participation in recruitment process - To ensure a cultural fit, Transition Coach recruitment must incorporate young people.
- Division of Home Stretch providers into appropriate Metropolitan Regional and District areas, but with the capacity to continue working with young people across boundaries

SYSTEM

- Community of Practice - Establish the practice to support the training of post care support workers. There are potential plans for integration into reinvigorating post graduate qualifications in Child Protection work, and micro credentialed courses.
- Home Stretch providers resourced in order to attract, recruit and retain appropriately skilled and experienced staff
- Ensure that commissioning of Home Stretch providers is undertaken in a place based way in partnership with Aboriginal community, and Aboriginal organisations