



Our most vulnerable children and young people need safe and appropriate care and supports in order to heal from significant trauma and lead healthy, productive lives. Foster and kinship carers provide a crucial role in children's lives and in our communities, but our system is at breaking point due to short-term thinking and a chronic lack of investment. The Greens have a plan to get it back on track.

All children need and deserve a safe, supportive and loving family environment. The quality of that environment, and the relationships within it, is the most critical factor in a child's development and their ability to thrive in life. Where families can't provide that environment, for a whole range of reasons, the state must step in to support and protect vulnerable children. In extreme cases, this requires the state to provide care for children outside of their families for a period of time.

The last decade has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number and rate of children in care. In 2007, around 5,000 Victorian children were in home-based care. Over the past decade, this figure has skyrocketed, with more than 10,000 children in care in 2017.ⁱ Aboriginal children are being removed from their families at a particularly alarming rate. In 2017 nearly one in 10 Victorian Aboriginal children were in care.ⁱⁱ

Where children must be removed from their homes, temporary care by friends and family (kinship carers) or foster carers are the preferred options, while working towards safe reunification of families. Thousands of voluntary carers across Victoria dedicate their time, energy and compassion to these children, bringing them into their homes and families on a temporary or permanent basis.

But this system is under extreme strain, and successive Labor and Liberal governments have failed to properly fund and prioritise this critical part of our child protection system. Carer allowances have barely increased over the past decade, and they don't reflect the actual cost of care. Carers are plugging the gaps left by government, and hundreds are leaving the system each year, stressed and no longer able to afford to undertake this voluntary work.

The Greens know that we can only support families properly and reduce the number of children going into care by properly funding preventative support services and engaging with families before problems become crises. That's why we're planning to significantly increase funding right across health and human services to tackle the drivers of child abuse and neglect, not only keeping Victorian children happy and healthy, but reducing the need for future expenditure in crisis service provision.

But right now, we also know that we need to address urgent issues for children currently in care, and for the families looking after them.

FOSTERING OUR SHARED FUTURE

THE GREENS' PLAN TO SUPPORT CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR CARERS



The Victorian Greens have a plan to:

- Extend the age for leaving care from 18 to 21 years of age – providing young people with a place to call home – and make provisions for the extension of care in law.
- Increase carer allowances to bring these into line with other states, increasing the rate by \$3500-5500 per annum, depending on the age of the child and complexity of care.
- Scale up the highly successful TrACK (Treatment and Care for Kids) program to provide 100 children in residential care or at risk of placement breakdown with experienced foster carers who are skilled, resourced and supported in the provision of therapeutic care.
- Streamline and simplify the expenses and reimbursement system to make it easier for carers to access, reducing out-of-pocket costs to carers and ensuring that children and young people's needs are better met.

MORE SUPPORT FOR 18-21 YEAR OLDS

The Greens will invest up to \$60 million over the forward estimates to extend care from 18 to 21 years of age. Evidence shows that this would result in significantly improved outcomes for care leavers, and would provide substantial savings through reduced reliance on a range of services.

Many families routinely support their children – financially and emotionally – beyond the age of 18 as they adjust to independence in adulthood. With the cost of living increasing year on year, this support is absolutely vital to so many young adults.

But for the majority of children living in home-based care, this simply isn't an option. There are very few supports available to children over the age of 18, and

even where foster families are committed to continued support, it's often not financially possible.

There is strong evidence from the UK, US, Canada and elsewhere that providing support beyond the age of 18 results in much better outcomes for children,ⁱⁱⁱ including:

- Improved engagement with education and employment;
- Housing stability and decreased reliance on public housing;
- Improved physical and mental health outcomes;
- Reduced incidence of alcohol and drug dependency;
- Reduced interaction with the justice system; and
- Improved levels of social and community integration.

Financial modelling undertaken by Deloitte Access Economics in 2016 estimates that savings for just one cohort of care leavers would be \$19 million over 40 years.^{iv} Year on year, these savings would run into hundreds of millions saved in provision of a whole range of services. Many of the benefits in terms of improved physical and mental health of care leavers and their ability to recover from trauma cannot be quantified, but are hugely important.

As part of this commitment, the Greens would seek to amend the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 to create an obligation for the state to provide a range of appropriate supports to young people in care up to the age of 21.

INCREASE CARER ALLOWANCES

Carer allowances in Victoria don't cover the true costs of providing foster care, falling between \$50-70 short per week. The Greens would increase annual allowances by \$3,500-5,500 per year, depending on the age of the child and the complexity of care, at a cost of \$7 million a year.

Carer allowances in Victoria fall around \$70 per week short of the actual costs of providing foster care. On average, that's a shortfall of more than \$3,600 per year.

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Kinship carers routinely face additional financial pressures. Despite providing the same function in our communities, they are generally paid lower allowances compared with foster carers.^v This inequity has a huge impact on Aboriginal carers and children in particular, which the Victorian Ombudsman recently described as 'shameful'.^{vi}

Carers routinely supplement these allowances to support and nurture children in their care, funding their participation in sports activities, specialist medical appointments, travel to re-connect with siblings, and so much more.

Many carers have willingly done this in the past and will continue to do so. But they should never be put in this position. Inadequate allowances are a major contributor to the large numbers of carers exiting the system^{vii}; the reality is that many simply can't afford to subsidise placements, regardless of how committed they are to the role.

Victoria needs to increase allowances to bring it in line with other Australian states and territories, and to ensure that families who play such a vital role in protecting and supporting the most vulnerable Victorian children aren't financially penalised for their efforts and commitment.

BUILDING FOSTER CARE CAPACITY FOR CHILDREN WITH COMPLEX NEEDS

The Greens will seek to scale up the highly successful TrACK program to provide an additional 100 children with a supportive and nurturing home environment, providing foster carers with the support and resources they need to care for children with complex needs in a home-based setting.

Treatment and Care for Kids (TrACK) is a therapeutic home-based care program providing intensive support to children with complex needs. The program has operated since 2002, supporting the recovery and stability of 48 children who have experienced horrific

trauma, including torture, sexual abuse and witnessing murder.^{viii}

Children who have entered the TrACK program were at extreme risk of progressing into the criminal justice system and developing major mental health concerns and substance addiction. Research has found that the vast majority of children in the program had defied expectations to build stable and secure relationships, and developed hopes and aspirations for their own futures.

TrACK is a proven concept grounded in a sophisticated understanding of trauma. It supports foster carers to develop high-level skills in trauma-informed therapy, and these efforts are already delivering dividends. The Greens would scale TrACK up significantly, providing up to \$10 million per year to take in an additional 100 children with complex needs over the next four years.

REVIEW AND IMPROVE THE EXPENSES AND REIMBURSEMENT SYSTEM

The Greens will push for an urgent, rapid review to determine how best to streamline and simplify the reimbursement of expenses for children and young people in care, and will overhaul the system based on these findings.

Carers have been struggling with a slow and frustrating expenses system for years. Carers have reported having legitimate claims rejected, and having to cover significant costs for children and young people in their care themselves.

The Victorian Ombudsman, in her investigation into support to kinship carers, confirmed significant problems with the system, recommending urgent streamlining to make it actually work for carers.^{ix}

The Greens will undertake a rapid review of the current system to identify how best to make this system work better for agencies and carers, and we will overhaul the system based on those findings.

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<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/sovcreport08.pdf>, 'Child protection and family services additional service delivery data 2016-17' from the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, and 'Child Protection Australia 2016/17', Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 9 March 2018:
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- ⁱⁱ 'Child Protection in Australia 2016-17', Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018, page 48:
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/66c7c364-592a-458c-9ab0-f90022e25368/aihw-cws-63.pdf.aspx?inline=true>
- ⁱⁱⁱ 'Raising our children: Guiding young Victorians in care into adulthood', Deloitte Access Economics, commissioned by Anglicare, 2016: http://thehomestretch.org.au/site/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Raising-Our-Children_Guiding-Young-Victorians-in-Care-into-Adulthood.pdf
- ^{iv} 'Raising our Children: Guiding young Victorians in care into adulthood', Deloitte Access Economics, commissioned by Anglicare Victoria, April 2016:
http://thehomestretch.org.au/site/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Raising-Our-Children_Guiding-Young-Victorians-in-Care-into-Adulthood.pdf
- ^v 'Investigation into the financial support provided to kinship carers', Victorian Ombudsman, December 2017:
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- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Lorraine Thompson, Morag McArthur, Elizabeth Watt, 'Foster care attraction, recruitment, support and retention', Australian Catholic University Institute of Child Protection Studies, 2016:
https://www.acu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/113503/7/Foster_Carer_Literature_Review_2016.pdf
- ^{viii} Dr Lynne McPherson, Dr Glory Gatwiri and Dr Nadine Cameron, 'Evaluation of the Treatment and Care for Kids Program (TrACK)', Southern Cross University, commissioned by Anglicare and the Australian Childhood Foundation, 2018
- ^{ix} Victorian Ombudsman, op cit.