VICTORIA’S VULNERABLE CHILDREN

OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY
In January 2011, Premier the Hon. Ted Baillieu, commissioned former Supreme Court Judge the Hon. Philip Cummins, Emeritus Professor Dorothy Scott and Mr Bill Scales AO, to comprehensively investigate systemic problems in Victoria’s child protection system and make recommendations to strengthen and improve protection and support.

The inquiry was called the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry and during 2011 consulted widely with the Victorian community and stakeholders. In total, the panel conducted:

> 18 public sittings throughout Victoria (including regional areas), involving more than 130 presentations, 200 speakers and more than 900 pages of transcript.

> Multiple consultations with Victoria’s child protection workforce and community service organisations, children and young people and Aboriginal and other culturally and linguistically diverse organisations.

> Three workshops with the Inquiry Reference Group.

> About 100 other meetings and visits, involving the Children’s Court, public sector agencies, independent experts and non-government service providers.

The inquiry also received more than 200 written submissions and 80 supplementary submissions from organisations and individuals.

The final report, The Report of the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry, was tabled in the Victorian Parliament by the Minister for Community Services, the Hon. Mary Wooldridge, on 28 February 2012.

The report comprised three volumes and more than 800 pages. It made 90 recommendations, 20 findings and 14 matters for attention. The report is available for download at www.childprotectioninquiry.vic.gov.au

This Directions Paper outlines the first phase and next steps of the Victorian Government’s response to the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry as at May 2012.
MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

One of the biggest challenges the Victorian community faces is the protection of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people.

Every year the number of infants, toddlers, children and teenagers who are beaten, malnourished, neglected or sexually abused by their parents is growing.

The health, education and employment outcomes for children removed from their homes and placed into care are almost universally poor and these children are hugely over-represented in the youth, and later adult, justice systems.

Right now, these children just can’t win and the help we offer is sporadic and fragmented. The quality of care is inconsistent.

Consecutive Ombudsman’s reports in November 2009 and May 2010 articulated a catalogue of failures in the management of the statutory system and out-of-home care under the previous Labor government.

As a new Coalition Government we are determined to improve the life prospects for vulnerable children and young people.

The findings and recommendations of the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry provide us with a detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis of the existing state of Victoria’s child protection system and a road map for change.

The changes needed include policy innovation, culture change, legislation and new or expanded programs. This Directions Paper outlines our planned year one reforms and activities.

We are also committing a funding package of $336 million over four years in the 2012-13 Budget. This is in addition to the $98 million in new funding we provided in the 2011-12 Budget to commence reform.

Our reform agenda and this package of funding recognises the need for broad transformational change as well as the improvement of existing processes and services that are not working or are poorly targeted. We know government needs to work better across portfolios and to formally accept our part of a shared responsibility for improving outcomes for vulnerable children.

In order to lead and drive the cross-portfolio change required, we have established a high-level Ministerial Committee and committed to the development and oversight of a whole of government vulnerable children and families strategy.

This strategy will be called Victoria’s Vulnerable Children – Our Shared Responsibility and we anticipate releasing it during 2013.

The policy development and roll-out of change will clearly take many years, but it is incredibly important.

It represents a comprehensive step forward for some long overdue improvements and enhancements across the spectrum of Victorian services to protect vulnerable children; from prevention and diversion, to early intervention, the courts, care, support and the transition to independence.

I commend this Directions Paper to all those committed to the protection of vulnerable children and look forward to working with you on our shared responsibility.

The Hon. Mary Wooldridge MP
Minister for Mental Health, Women’s Affairs and Community Services
Child Protection in Victoria

Victorians made 55,000 reports of suspected abuse and neglect to DHS in 2010-11. This represents an increase of 49 per cent from the year 2000, although the rate of substantiations of abuse has remained steady.¹

Significant risk factors for child abuse and neglect include parent, family or caregiver characteristics involving:

> A history of family violence
> Alcohol and other substance misuse
> Mental health problems
> Intellectual disability
> Parental history of abuse, and
> Situational stress.²

70 per cent of the children who were the subject of a report to child protection in 2009-10 had either previously been the subject of a report, or were subsequently re-reported to child protection in 2010-11. 2,000 of these children were the subject of more than ten reports to date over their lifetime.³

Aboriginal children are around 10 times more likely to be the subject of a substantiation of abuse or neglect compared with non-Aboriginal children.⁴

Around half of all children for whom substantiated abuse was found in 2009-10 had also previously been the victims of substantiated abuse earlier in their lives.⁵

Every week nearly 60 young Victorians are removed from their parents and placed in out-of-home care.⁶

On average, these children stay in the care of the state for about 18 months and some will move between three or more separate placements in a single year.⁷

For those children who will never be reunited with their parents, it takes an average of five years from the time of a child’s first report for a permanent care order to be granted.⁸

Over the past decade, the number of children and young people in out-of-home care has increased by 46 per cent – an annual growth of around four per cent per year.⁹

By Year 10, 41.1 per cent of all children in out-of-home care perform below or well below reading standards, compared with 23.7 per cent of the general student population.¹⁰

Over the period 2001 to 2011 the number of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care increased by over 80 per cent. While Aboriginal Children make up only about 1.2 per cent of the general population, they comprise 16 per cent of children on care and protection orders and are over 11 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Aboriginal children.¹¹


¹ Final Report of the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry (PVVCI), p xxvi and xxx
² PVVCI, p xxxii
³ PVVCI, p 208
⁴ PVVCI, p 293
⁵ PVVCI, p 208
⁶ PVVCI, p xxvi
⁷ PVVCI, p 243 and 244
⁸ PVVCI, p 229
⁹ PVVCI, p 233
¹⁰ PVVCI, p 250
¹¹ PVVCI, p 294
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Appendix 1: 2012-13 Budget Papers
OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN

We all have a responsibility for protecting children from abuse and neglect, and we all need to understand what that means.

The aim is broader than improving a government-funded system of child protection — it is to protect, support and care for thousands of individual children.

The Victorian Government has a key role to play in protecting vulnerable children. However, protecting children is a community-wide responsibility. Doing nothing is not an option, we need to all get involved.

We need to work together to improve outcomes for vulnerable children. For its part, the Victorian Government is committed to system-wide reform and improvements that aim to prevent child abuse and neglect, reduce the impact when it does occur, and improve the outcomes for children and young people in the statutory child protection system.

The scope of reform needed to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable children is broad.

It encompasses all of the mainstream and specialist services, organisations, and range of personal and professional inter-relationships that work with vulnerable children and families to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect.

We know that universal services need to work better across different service streams, departments and agencies to take more responsibility, and to be accountable for their actions.

We also know that we need to focus more effort on early intervention and support for vulnerable families. We need to do everything we can to help families avoid the critical breakdowns that result in children being subjected to abuse and neglect and requiring the intervention of the statutory child protection system.

And we know that we need to do more for the traumatised children who do end up in out-of-home care. We need to support their healing and nurture their development.

This Directions Paper is not a comprehensive summary of all existing government activity targeting vulnerable children – rather, it is a summary of new actions, programs, trials and reforms.

Our reforms include our first year initiatives, longer term commitments and areas to be further discussed and developed to feed into the final strategy. The reforms in this paper are structured around five key action areas:

1. Building effective and connected services
2. Enhancing education and building capacity
3. Making a child-friendly legal system
4. Providing safe, stable and supportive out-of-home care
5. Introducing accountability and transparency

We all have a shared responsibility across community, government, service providers and individuals. Every Victorian who comes into contact with highly vulnerable children and their families should feel some responsibility for their outcomes. This includes families, friends, neighbours, mainstream services, such as education, through to specialist services, such as out-of-home care.

In line with this shared responsibility, organisations should strive to provide connected services and get those services to those who most need them. Tailored, flexible approaches must be available for groups or communities with specific needs or preferences, including Aboriginal children and their families.

There are geographic areas and specific communities in Victoria where disadvantage is significant and entrenched, and the Victorian Government will concentrate effort in these areas to reach those families who are most in need of support. We will work in local areas and move towards an approach that directly engages with vulnerable children and their families.
In addition, this government will take a number of steps to better ensure public accountability for services provided to vulnerable children and families. We will improve oversight mechanisms and structures, and bring a new focus to measuring client outcomes, in both government provided services and services delivered by the community services sector.
BUILDING EFFECTIVE AND CONNECTED SERVICES

ACTION AREA 1

Better services need to be effective, and to be effective services must be connected. A cookie-cutter approach does not fit the needs of thousands of vulnerable children, the families they are in, and their individual circumstances.

No service that deals with a vulnerable child or family should be considered ‘stand alone’, nor should any service be duplicated.

We know that children are most at risk when parental problems such as mental illness, drug and alcohol misuse, family violence, homelessness or intellectual disability impede their parent’s ability to care for them appropriately.

However, services for adults have not always taken account of the needs of their children or the risks they might face. A shared responsibility requires a new approach, making the most of the strengths of specialist services and including children in our thinking about the development of services for adults.

We need to ask questions about how a parent’s mental health issues are affecting their children. We need to be cognisant that family violence witnessed by children creates harm for the child and their subsequent behaviour. We should always have the needs of children in mind, even if the immediate problem demanding attention does not seem to have an obvious effect on children. Adults’ actions matter to children and have long term consequences.

Further, people accessing government services often have other, less obvious needs. Educational disadvantage can be affected by a parent’s drinking problem. Housing issues may be a result of disability issues. People’s lives are complex and multi-faceted, while government services are often single-issue and siloed. Government’s traditional approach of single-issue, cohort-specific services does not meet the needs of vulnerable children.

Building connected services requires:
> Taking a family-centred approach to vulnerability across government and community services
> Recognising the impacts of parental problems on vulnerable children, and introducing a therapeutic approach where appropriate, and
> Building understanding, connection and accountability across program and organisational boundaries.

We need to get out of thinking about how we run a system, and get into thinking about how we help individual children and families.

We’ve already started. The following actions are underway or commencing in 2012-13, and the longer-term commitments that follow set out how the government will continue to work with individuals and families, strengthen the services addressing their complex needs, and build strong links between those services.

The needs of vulnerable families have increased over time, and government needs to change so we can better respond to those families and the needs of vulnerable children. Released in December 2011 by the Ministers for Community Services and Housing, Human Services: The case for change outlines the need to change the way specialist health and human services are delivered in Victoria, and explains how we can, and should, build on the strengths of existing services to make a real difference to the lives of vulnerable Victorians and their families.

Human Services: The case for change outlines our vision of a service system that supports and protects the vulnerable as its first priority; one that is holistic, client-centred and family-focussed and demonstrably achieves improved outcomes for vulnerable Victorians. We are calling our new approach ‘Services Connect’.

Change takes time and effort. The transition to providing all clients with a more personalised service delivery response that holistically engages with them and builds their capacity will not be simple.
quick or easy. To achieve the transformative change needed, individual departments must work in partnership with their community-based service delivery partners, across the Victorian Government, and with other levels of government in the human services system. For the Department of Human Services’ Services Connect model, work to better link with other government departments will begin with the mental health and alcohol and other drug services provided by the Department of Health. For example, a human services client using mental health or alcohol and drug services will have a key worker, who provides comprehensive planning, support and coordination of services, based on their full range of identified needs.

This type of transformation in service delivery is expected to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect, reduce the negative impact when it does occur and improve the outcomes for children who require government care and support.

The first step in Services Connect is delivering on the government’s commitment to reform case management in two lead sites in Dandenong and Geelong/South West coast. Case management reform started in February 2012 and the new model involves working with clients with complex needs, through a single, coordinated case plan and key worker. We will be examining and learning from what we are doing along the way, and making sure Services Connect addresses the needs of vulnerable families, through a rigorous evaluation process. We will also examine options to expand the Services Connect approach, with a focus on children known to statutory child protection. This means considering the merits of a single case plan model for these children that connects other areas of government to develop a shared understanding of an individual client’s needs and to ensure that we are all working towards a common goal.

Services where children live

The Victorian Government is committed to delivering services that are effective and sustainable. Services should represent value for money as well as making a difference to the outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

The Victorian Government makes a significant investment in services to support and protect vulnerable families and children across many areas. As the system evolves from a silo-based system to a family-centred system our current funding approaches will also evolve.

The Victorian Government will be looking at all services that it delivers and funds and will consider where we can work in local areas. Our current spread of services and service infrastructure is based on historic patterns of population growth and demand. These patterns no longer reflect current need or what we can reasonably predict will be future needs.

We have reliable information and data that clearly shows that vulnerable children and families live in known geographic areas of high disadvantage, share certain demographic characteristics, or identifiable clients within certain universal services, such as education, or specialist services such as mental health.

It makes sense that we make more use of this information to better target our services and actively reach out to those at risk to provide support before problems get worse.

We will use patterns and trends in population growth and service use data to better plan and co-ordinate the provision of integrated services to areas of need.

Evidence-based therapeutic responses will better support vulnerable children and families to recover so that they have a chance to achieve their aspirations. We will better utilise evidence and available clinical knowledge within programs to underpin how they work and to inform rigorous evaluation of the impact of government provided and funded services.

New ways of working often require new structures. If we want to shift from systems-based thinking to family-centred services, then we must be open to change. The government has already committed to increasing the proportion of statutory child protection staff who provide front line services.
The Department of Human Services is preparing for the roll-out of an organisational restructure to improve services to individual clients. One of the ways it is doing this is to position senior management and decision-making responsibility as close to clients, including vulnerable families and children, as possible. The 17 new local DHS Areas will be able to more flexibly respond to the needs of local communities and better connect local services for vulnerable families and children. In addition, the restructure will support service delivery reform by breaking down service delivery silos to make it easier for vulnerable families to engage with connected government services and government-funded services.

Some of the new services are detailed below, including examples of how we are working to link those services.

**Child protection**

Since 2011, an additional 89 child protection workers have been funded, including 42 child protection workers in the 2012–13 budget, to help address growing demand. These additional staff will become part of the most significant child protection workforce reform since our statutory system was established.

A new statutory child protection operating model is to be implemented during 2012. It involves a package of workforce and operational measures that aim, over time, to improve outcomes for children by improving frontline staff retention and career pathways. This includes better support, simplified practice guidance, and clearer guidelines. The new model will be delivered on an area basis, to strengthen links with local communities and services.

To support these changes, we will continue to fund the Specialist Intervention Team to provide targeted specialists to operational hot spots, and the statutory child protection Principal Practitioners to help provide best practice support for children with highly complex and challenging needs.

ChildFIRST is the key platform in Victoria for providing a non-statutory, community-based referral point to connect vulnerable children and families to services and supports that might help them prevent family breakdown or worse problems down the track.

The government has provided additional funding for ChildFIRST and other non-statutory family services to provide increased service capacity in targeted areas, where services are most needed. We are also reviewing ChildFIRST governance arrangements to improve performance, accountability and service planning.

In recent years Family Group Conferences and Aboriginal Family Decision Making have proven effective models for involving families and extended families in the protection of children. Whereas previously, these conferences have occurred in an ad hoc manner, they will now become a regular part of practice in statutory child protection. For example, where abuse has been substantiated there will be expanded use of Family Group Conferences or Aboriginal Family Decision Making. In these conferences, child protection workers and parents will discuss their concerns about the children and develop plans to ensure that children’s needs are met.
Alcohol, drugs, mental health and children

Children are profoundly affected by the misuse of alcohol and drugs by family and friends. Many vulnerable young people use illicit drugs and alcohol at a greater rate than the general population of young people, with often devastating effects. The government has committed to deliver a new Victorian Government Alcohol and Drug Strategy — the first such strategy in more than ten years.

Services should be person- and family-centred. They should be better integrated, based on the best available evidence, and more responsive to the needs of local communities and particular groups, including Aboriginal Victorians. We need to engage earlier, with more flexible support, recognising that people can, and do, recover. As a first step in treatment reform, we will train our staff to better respond to the needs of children.

Mental health issues affect hundreds of thousands of people across Victoria. Many are children, and many adults affected by mental health issues have children living in their homes. We need to ensure that mental health services for adults take into account the needs of their children.

Mental health services’ interaction with parents will be guided by the new Framework for recovery-oriented practice 2011. Specific reform work has already commenced in key service delivery areas.

Work has started to strengthen Victoria’s front-end mental health services to improve family-sensitive practice and identify and respond to risk factors for family violence and child abuse and neglect.

The same approach will be taken in reforming Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation Support Services. The reforms will improve outcomes for clients and their children through making family relationships and parenting roles a core part of care planning, as well as increasing flexibility in the way we provide support.

Mental health services will also seek to learn from the Families where a Parent has a Mental Illness (FaPMI) program, through a comprehensive evaluation. FaPMI aims to increase the capacity of specialist mental health services to respond effectively to the parenting needs of their clients and their clients’ children and to enhance the capacity of ChildFIRST Family Services to respond to vulnerable families where a parent has a mental illness and/or drug and alcohol problems.

Across both the mental health and alcohol and drug services sectors, the Victorian Government is committed to working to strengthen the capacity for adult services to recognise the parenting responsibilities of adult clients in the planning and delivery of treatment. Workforce development will emphasise the importance of family-focussed practice, including responding to children at risk. This work will help identify vulnerable dependent children, and work with other services to respond to the needs of these children.

It is anticipated that a number of provisions under the forthcoming new Mental Health Act will increase the involvement of families and recognition of family relationships in the treatment planning and whole-of-person recovery oriented approach to decision making.
Family violence and children

Effectively responding to family violence is particularly important to prevent the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Children subject to or exposed to violence are damaged, not only physically but emotionally, and more likely to develop problems as a result.

We need a strategic, coordinated and integrated approach to family violence services, which will be further progressed through the whole of government Action Plan to Address Violence Against Women and Their Children, currently under development. Progress has already been made to better connect family violence services with the broader service system. The new action plan will focus on a more integrated approach to early intervention and prevention, as well as the delivery of more integrated supports and services to women and their children across government, in statutory child protection, youth and family services, housing services, mental and physical health services, police, the courts and corrections systems. The learnings from this work will also be considered alongside the evaluation of the existing Indigenous Family Violence 10 year plan.

Responding to child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse is the most difficult form of abuse to detect and respond to. When investigating allegations of child sexual abuse, a specialist response is required that will respond to the child’s immediate needs in an expert and coordinated way. This is because child sexual abuse is often a hidden crime and perpetrators may groom child victims and pressure children not to ‘tell’.

The Victorian Government has been trialling the operation of Multi-Disciplinary Centres where specialist police investigators from the Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams are co-located with child protection practitioners and sexual assault counsellors.

The results show clear benefits and improved outcomes for victims and families and the Victorian Government has committed to establish three new Multi-Disciplinary Centres.

These Multi-Disciplinary Centres will be located in areas of high need and will provide services in a single location for victims and their families that seek to minimise further trauma by providing a holistic, collaborative response and a seamless connection to statutory child protection services as needed.

Some children exhibit disturbing sexual behaviours, such as sexually abusing siblings or younger children. This causes significant damage to both the abused child and the abusing child. Treating problem sexual behaviours in children early will help prevent abuse. A significant expansion of treatment places for children and young people with problem sexual behaviours or sexually abusive behaviours will assist in addressing these behaviours and prevent further abuse of other children.
BUILDING EFFECTIVE AND CONNECTED SERVICES

ACTION AREA 1

Changing the way we work together

> Whole of government initiative to explore developing Single Case plans to overcome barriers to the coordination of cross-government services for children known to statutory child protection and their families.

> Multi-Disciplinary Centres that co-locate specialist police investigators, child protection practitioners and sexual assault counsellors, to provide a holistic response from a single location to victims of sexual assault and child abuse and their families.

> The whole of government Alcohol and Drug Strategy will have a family-centred approach including training the workforce to better support and respond to the needs of children.

> The whole of government Action Plan to Address Violence Against Women and Their Children will outline ways to provide early integrated support across government and funded services that can better respond to family violence.

> Services connect is a new model of working with clients with complex needs through a single case plan. This is being trialled and evaluated in Dandenong, Geelong and the South West coast.
Our starting point must be to help vulnerable children and families before they are reported to statutory child protection services, to strengthen families and to prevent abuse before it occurs.

Education and learning are critical to an individual’s life chances, and education is a pathway out of poverty and intergenerational disadvantage.

The Victorian Government is committed to improving formal educational outcomes for children and young people involved in the statutory child protection system, as well as focusing on building the capacity of parents through building parenting skills and understanding. Community service organisations and their staff need to respond better to their clients and families through support, coaching and training.

There has been significant growth in the number of reports being made to the Department of Human Services statutory child protection service because police, professionals, community or family members have concerns about the safety or wellbeing of children. This is a positive step, but picking up the phone and reporting a concern does not absolve responsibility to do what you can to help.

A shared responsibility means mobilising all our efforts to understand what is driving the increase in reports to the statutory child protection system and the situations where providing earlier interventions can be effective.

This includes building the capacity of government and community sector organisations and ensuring a robust sector workforce. There are thousands of people working every day with vulnerable families, and we need to make sure our workforce is better able to identify and engage with the needs of vulnerable children and their families.

Our education and health systems play a key role. Vulnerable families generally have worse than average health, poorer education outcomes, and have higher support needs than other families. Despite being worse off, these families are less likely to access and therefore benefit from the services that could help them.

Some vulnerable children and families need more help to engage with these services. Better access to services would enable us to intervene earlier to help families more effectively engage with the services they need to address their problems. Better engagement will lead to better outcomes.

The best care that most children can have is from parents who love them, who know how to care for them, and are capable of doing so. Problems that impede effective parenting can also impede effective use of the services that support parents. Difficulties faced by vulnerable families will leave them less confident in dealing with doctors, teachers, child care workers or specialists. They may fail to attend appointments or follow up referrals.

Our universal education and health systems have the potential to be more inclusive and responsive to higher-need families and children. Some universal services might need to engage children or families in different settings, so that vulnerable children do not miss out. Sometimes it may be as simple as a change in attitude, to show people who are distrustful that the service cares about them.

Vulnerable families need more capable universal education and health services that identify and address their problems, and ensure that their children get the support and opportunities that are vital to their future. Earlier support will ensure that problems are less likely to escalate to a statutory child protection report, to school truancy, or to crime.

Service providers need to look at what they do and why they do it to make sure they are in the best possible position to look after vulnerable children. That includes government services at all levels, but also the community sector. Well-managed organisations with good people with a focus on the needs of vulnerable children will get better results for those children.

The following actions underway or commencing in 2012-13, and the longer-term commitments that follow, set out how the government will encourage Victoria’s ante-natal health services, early childhood health and education and care services, schools and associated student supports to play their part in this shared responsibility to prevent abuse and neglect by intervening earlier.
Addressing risk factors early – pregnancy and infants

The government has already committed to a number of initiatives to prevent child abuse and neglect through services that assist pregnant women and their newborns through to age four.

Early parenting support programs help vulnerable children get the best start in life by improving their health, safety and development, strengthening the parent-child bond and assisting parents to build their confidence and skills in parenting their children.

We need a better and more consistent understanding of the psychosocial factors that can lead to increased vulnerabilities for women and their children. This work will be assisted by the release of the National Ante-natal Care Guidelines (first trimester), which are currently being developed. These guidelines will provide evidence-based advice for all health professionals involved in managing the care of healthy pregnant women in the first trimester of pregnancy. The guidelines will seek to optimise the health and wellbeing of all expectant mothers and their babies, including assisting health professionals to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their families.

The Victorian Government will continue the Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies program, which maximises the health and wellbeing of vulnerable pregnant women and their babies by providing community based support, linkages and health education through local community health services in eight local government areas of high need. This program provides complementary care and important links with other key health and welfare providers such as maternity services, the Cradle to Kinder initiative and maternal and child health services.

Cradle to Kinder began in 2012, when the Victorian Government established intensive ante and post-natal support for vulnerable families through ten Cradle to Kinder programs, including Aboriginal specific programs. The program aims to improve the family’s long term ability to be independent, and to prevent the need for tertiary-level services in the future. Cradle to Kinder helps, for up to four years, highly vulnerable expectant mothers under 25 years of age whose children are at risk of statutory child protection involvement, with priority being given to Aboriginal young women and young women in out-of-home care.

Mainstream health services also have a valuable role to play in preventing child abuse and neglect by using their interactions with parents to identify issues and provide early support.

The Maternal and Child Health Service plays an essential role in supporting families, including the most vulnerable, by promoting family health, wellbeing and safety, making referrals and linking families with the local community.

The Maternal and Child Health Service offers all families ten free health and development checks from a qualified nurse in the first three years of a child’s life. In practice, many families do not attend all of these appointments. By the time a child is 18 months old, around 30 per cent of families no longer participate.

The Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Service currently provides the main way in which more intensive support is made available to more vulnerable families. We are developing options to better respond to the needs of vulnerable children.

The impact and effectiveness of these programs for vulnerable children and their families in the Maternal and Child Health system needs to be better understood and, where necessary, adapted to better suit their individual needs.

Over the next three years, the government is implementing the recommendations of the Victorian Auditor-General’s 2011 report, Early childhood development services: access and quality, including exercising more purposeful oversight of quality and consistency of planning by local councils, who deliver Maternal and Child Health Services and play a large part in other early childhood services.

The government will also develop a better understanding of service demand, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged families, and strengthen its monitoring of service quality, as recommended by the Auditor General.
The government will seek to ensure that local councils have the capacity and resources to deliver Maternal and Child Health Services to meet the needs of vulnerable families. We are committing to additional funding to sustain Maternal and Child Health delivery to Victoria’s growing population, which will in turn allow the government to actively reform Maternal and Child Health and Enhanced Maternal and Child Health.

Local government is a key partner of the Victorian Government in planning and supporting early childhood services, particularly Maternal and Child Health, and councils often provide active support for linking vulnerable children with universal services. As part of this initiative, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development will negotiate a new Memorandum of Understanding with the Municipal Association of Victoria, including a commitment to a substantial broader reform project to develop evidence-based recommendations for the refinement and modification of the Maternal and Child Health Service model.

In 2012, the Department of Health will pilot a peri-natal emotional health program model for the metropolitan area to expand service delivery and inform future service planning. This builds on the Peri-natal Emotional Health Program that has been established in rural Victoria to support women and families identified as experiencing mental health symptoms during pregnancy and one year post birth. The program is improving the capacity of the peri-natal service sector to identify and support women experiencing mental health symptoms, and psychosocial risk factors – such as family violence and drug and alcohol use – in the critical first months of their babies’ lives.

The government is committed to strengthening collaborative practices between public maternity services and Maternal and Child Health Services. The government is developing a revised Continuity of Care protocol, which will support better information sharing and comprehensive discharge planning to strengthen community support for vulnerable new mothers and their children.

While we are investing in many universal and targeted early support programs, they need to come together to form a comprehensive, coherent and coordinated system of services. There are multiple programs aimed at vulnerable young children, but they are spread across at least three departments and each have different target cohorts and eligibility requirements, and operate through different platforms.

We will undertake a whole of government project to explore the options to better streamline and coordinate programs that support the health, development and wellbeing of vulnerable parents and young children (from ante-natal to age four).

The capacity of health services to more effectively identify vulnerable children and their families and then proactively engage must be addressed. As such, the government will be updating the Health Services Vulnerable Children’s Framework for acute health services. The Framework provides comprehensive information, education and tools for health professionals and health services to support the early identification and responsiveness to vulnerable children at risk of child abuse and neglect. The government is committed to updating and expanding the Framework to incorporate other parts of the health system, such as community health, mental health and drug and alcohol services.

The government is reaffirming its commitment to programs that engage vulnerable families in the early learning of essential parenting skills, by continuing the Small Talk Early Home Learning initiative for vulnerable families in targeted locations, building on a recent pilot program encouraging parent-led learning in the early years of life. These parenting skills are crucial to brain development in children. Supported playgroups for vulnerable families in targeted locations, will also continue under this initiative. Supported playgroups allow parents to build connections with each other, with universal services, and with more specialised supports that may be available.
Kindergarten and early childhood education
The government will continue funding for vulnerable children to access early childhood services. In order to support healthy brain development, children need to be actively engaged in play and communication from an early age, which is why access to child care services can be so important to vulnerable families. The government will continue to provide ongoing funding to help children known to statutory child protection access quality early childhood education and care, including three-year-old kindergarten programs, to ensure they have access to two years of quality education and care before beginning school. This builds on other government initiatives, which have seen significant increases in the numbers of Aboriginal three-year-olds accessing a kindergarten program.

The government is also supporting a new pilot program developed by the Children’s Protection Society to provide centre-based, high quality early years education to vulnerable 0-5 year old children. This pilot builds on successful programs undertaken in the United States, and aims to support vulnerable children and their families and help them avoid ongoing involvement with statutory child protection.

Schools and formal education
All children should be engaged in education. They should be supported at school and given the best chance in life to live, learn and grow. Schools play a vital role in improving the lives of children.

Schools can also play a fundamental role in preventing abuse and neglect. The government will continue working to improve the engagement and support of vulnerable students and families in schools and provide better access to learning opportunities for vulnerable young people and vulnerable parents.

The Student Support Service is being reformed by the devolution of resources to principals in school clusters. Student support services operate in government schools to directly support students facing a range of barriers to achieving their educational and developmental potential and to build teacher capacity to better respond to the needs of vulnerable children. This reform will strengthen Student Support Services and other health and allied health services to further improve the early identification of children and young people at risk in schools. Moreover, the continuation of funding for 150 Primary Welfare Officers will assist schools to tackle bullying and support students with behavioural, mental health or welfare problems.

In addition to these reforms, a new online case management system for student support services will be introduced to better enable information sharing between professionals supporting vulnerable young people with complex needs.

Underlying these supports for government schools will be a School Compact that articulates a collective responsibility for schools to work in partnership with other agencies and with families for the learning, health and well-being of all children and young people, including those from vulnerable families and in out-of-home care.

The government has committed to reforming the funding model for re-engagement programs to support delivery of a wide range of programs and approaches across the system.

We will continue to build the capacity of principals and schools to work with community organisations to manage and respond to difficult and challenging behaviour, and will also strengthen a staged approach to working with families to promote and reinforce student attendance. A multi-layered professional learning program has been developed for the Victorian school system to help build the capacity of teachers to manage challenging behaviours in the classroom.

The school community can also play a key role in preventing abuse and neglect, particularly sexual abuse. The Victorian Government will aim to equip families with high quality information and advice about the prevention of child sexual abuse. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Department of Human Services, Department of Justice and Victoria Police will
work together to develop child sexual abuse prevention strategies tailored to children and young people. This will also involve using an evidence-based curriculum on sexuality education, respectful relationships and building protective factors.

Teachers, along with other professionals, are currently required to report suspected child abuse and neglect. To assist those professionals who are currently mandated reporters, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development will also roll out an eLearning module on Mandatory Reporting, for all teachers and principals in Victorian Government schools. This will also be available to Catholic and Independent school staff as well as other professionals online, and will better equip professionals to identify and respond to child abuse and neglect.

The government will also improve monitoring and tracking outcomes for individual vulnerable children and young people. This means building on the Student Mapping Tool, as well as continuing to provide schools with the resources they need to better support vulnerable students.

A similar commitment to finding new ways to coordinate effort and ensure that the most vulnerable young people do not miss out is being tested in Youth Partnerships now underway in several parts of the state.

The Youth Partnerships initiative is a whole of government initiative that is testing mechanisms for the education and youth service systems to work together in delivering improved responses to vulnerable young people. Highly vulnerable young people that have disengaged from education, for example those living in Residential Care settings are a specific focus in some of the Youth Partnership sites.

We are seeking opportunities to align existing effort and work with program stakeholders, like those involved in School Focussed Youth Service, to provide a contemporary program and policy environment that will better engage vulnerable young people in learning and reduce the escalation of issues they experience.

Capacity of the community services sector

Victoria’s community services sector has developed over many years as governments, churches, charities and not-for-profit groups have worked together to tackle disadvantage in the community.

The Victorian Government values the contribution of the community sector. It is a real strength of Victoria that many government-funded services are regularly provided by community organisations, rather than by government.

This provides choice and connection that other states don’t have to the same degree. Many in the sector are volunteers who give up their time to provide services and to manage and govern organisations. Those who work in and with the community sector to provide quality services helping vulnerable children deserve our thanks.

The development of the community sector to provide services, however, has led to a multiplicity of providers, funders and administrators – including all three levels of government. Successive governments have tackled specific issues through new layers of legislation and differing community services sector funding models, programs and infrastructure.

While each additional intervention may have made sense in isolation, the cumulative impact has created a prescriptive, siloed and overly bureaucratic system.

Additionally, shortcomings in the capacity and structures of some community service organisations are impacting the overall quality of service provision. In particular, a lack of capacity (skills, knowledge, and governance) means that some organisations struggle to maintain quality services.

The challenge is to ensure that organisations that work with vulnerable children and their families are of a sufficient quality and capacity to execute their duties and provide the best outcomes for vulnerable children.
Aboriginal children and families are often some of the most vulnerable in the community. That is why the government is committed to strengthening the capacity of all organisations to respond to Aboriginal children and families. Increased funding was announced in the 2011–12 budget and has been provided to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to deliver culturally responsive and high quality services.

The government is also moving to improve the quality of community sector provided residential care. New guidelines have now been developed, in consultation with community sector organisations, for contract staff in residential care units.

Victoria's community sector organisations do not just provide services to vulnerable children and their families. Many also provide other services within the wider community services sector. This means that the capacity of community sector organisations to effectively and efficiently deliver services is critical to achieving our aim to provide more connected services.

The Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry found that “the capacity and structure of community service organisations can impact on or impede the overall quality of service provision being purchased by government, particularly in complex human services areas.” Just as government is looking at the way we do things, and the way we are structured, the community sector needs to examine how it operates to provide the best possible services to vulnerable children. This may require reform of governance and oversight mechanisms, to ensure the sector is appropriately structured, regulated and funded. It may require new partnerships across sectors and service types to ensure that children get the best possible services, not just the best services that a single organisation can provide.

We work with peak groups and community organisations to identify opportunities for community sector reform across government funded services, to ensure better management, more effective regulation, and a clear focus on the needs of vulnerable children to enable us to work together to improve services.

The philanthropic and corporate sectors and the wider community also have important roles to play, and need to consider what they can offer to support vulnerable children and to ensure young people have a greater sense of belonging to their communities. Communities and the philanthropic and corporate sectors are well placed to develop local and innovative solutions to improve the lives of vulnerable children.

We would like these discussions to begin and build on what is already done by these sectors and the wider community. We want parents at schools, church groups, local sporting groups and volunteer groups as well as businesses to think about how they can include and support vulnerable children and families.
ENHANCING EDUCATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING

ACTION AREA 2

Addressing risk factors early

- A whole of government project will identify ways to streamline and better coordinate services to ensure early identification and support are provided to vulnerable parents and young children (from ante-natal up to four years old).

- Health services will have contact with a wide range of families and their capacity to identify and proactively respond to children at risk of abuse and neglect will be enhanced through education and tools such as the Health Services Vulnerable Children’s Framework. This framework will be updated and expanded to incorporate all parts of the health system.

- The Peri-natal Emotional Health Program will be extended to metropolitan Melbourne, to identify and support women with mental health symptoms during pregnancy and in the critical first 12 months of their babies’ lives.

- The Cradle to Kinder program is establishing intensive ante- and post-natal support for vulnerable expectant mothers to build their parenting skills and prevent the need for statutory child protection involvement.

- Supported playgroups for vulnerable families that allow parents to build connections with each other and with services and positive relationships with their children.

- Small Talk will provide support to vulnerable families with young children so that they have the skills and capacity to lead their children in learning. Families are a child’s first teacher.

Kindergarten, schools and formal education

- Access to three-year-old kindergarten programs for children known to statutory child protection will help improve access to quality early childhood education learning experiences that other children have.

- A new professional learning program is being introduced to help build the capacity of teachers to manage challenging behaviours in the classroom. This will be a multi-layered professional learning program and has been developed to build capacity within the Victorian school system to manage challenging behaviours in the classroom.

- Providing information and advice on preventing child sexual abuse to families will help protect children from abuse. Information will be developed and provided through an evidence-based curriculum on sexuality education, respectful relationships and protective factors.

Sector reform

- Work will commence with peak groups and community organisations to identify opportunities for community sector reform across government funded services to ensure better management and more effective regulation.
**ACTION AREA 3**

The legal system should protect children from harm and allow for intervention when abuse or neglect occurs. The law should in most cases leave parents, friends, families and communities to the job of raising children in a safe, loving environment.

However, the law should also assist families in addressing the issues that lead to child abuse and neglect whilst upholding the right of every child to have a safe and stable environment where they can develop.

A shared responsibility means adapting legal institutions to be more child-focussed in their decision making and in the processes for making decisions. When it is not possible to safely and effectively work with families to address their problems, formal court processes are used as a last resort. When families do come to court, procedures should encourage respectful communication among parties and minimise distress and confusion for the children.

The following actions, which are either underway or will commence in 2012-13, and the longer-term commitments that follow, will help to:

- Lead the development of a more child friendly legal system
- Strengthen the laws that protect children
- Continue and expand new mechanisms for problem solving, and
- Ensure that court processes, when needed, are tailored to their task.

**Laws to protect children**

The government will reform the laws that protect children against predatory sexual behaviour, such as ‘grooming’. Grooming is the process whereby an offender takes steps to prepare a child for sexual activity. It is insidious and much of it occurs online. Victoria’s existing laws are inadequate and can be significantly improved. The Attorney-General has sought urgent advice on criminal laws relating to online grooming offences, to ensure they capture grooming conduct and all aspects of this behaviour.

The government is concerned about the appropriateness of the law in relation to ‘sexting’. Sexting is a term for the creating, sharing, sending or posting of sexually suggestive or explicit messages or images via the internet, mobile phones or other electronic devices. This material often portrays the individual sending the message and has become increasingly prevalent among young people. Under Victorian law, any images depicting persons under 18 years of age in a sexual context are classified as child pornography. Relevant legislation covering child pornography has failed to keep pace with current technology. In particular, current laws often lead to young people convicted of sexting offences being placed on the Sex Offender Register. However, sexting can also involve adult offenders producing and transmitting child pornography. The government wants to ensure that the Sex Offender Register is targeted towards the protection of the community from predatory sexual offenders and does not inadvertently capture behaviour it was never intended to address.

The government has asked the Victorian Parliamentary Law Reform Committee to conduct an inquiry to examine all aspects of sexting, including the extent and effectiveness of existing education and awareness initiatives on the social and legal implications of this behaviour. The inquiry is due to report back to government in December 2012.

The Victorian Government is also supporting the work of the Standing Council of Police and Emergency Management to establish the Australian National Video Image Library / Child Exploitation Tracking System. This initiative will significantly enhance the forensic computer investigation capacity within Australia’s police services. It enables police to examine and classify large volumes of seized child exploitation material more efficiently and effectively. Critically, it also reduces the exposure of officers to such material and helps police to identify victims and to prosecute offenders.
The government will explore expanding the Children’s Court jurisdiction under family violence legislation so that multiple matters relating to both child protection and family violence can be dealt with together in the specialist Children’s Court. This will provide stronger protection for children who are the subject of a protection application and also witnesses of family violence.

In addition to reforming laws, the government will strengthen police investigation of child abuse, including through the establishment of Taskforce Astraea to combat the growing issue of online sexual abuse of children. Taskforce Astraea will focus on the identification and investigation of online child sex offenders and those who target children in committing these serious and devastating offences.

The government is committed to protecting children, families and the community through the operation of the Serious Sex Offenders (Detention and Supervision) Act 2009. The government will amend the Serious Sex Offenders (Detention and Supervision) Act 2009 to require the court to focus on the protection of children, families and the community and other factors when making decisions about suppression.

The government has already improved the response to registered sex offenders living in the community by delivering on our commitment to implement all the recommendations of the Ombudsman’s report ‘Whistleblowers Protection Act 2001 – Investigation into the Failure of Agencies to Manage Registered Sex Offenders’.

Furthermore, the government has commissioned a report from the Victorian Law Reform Commission on the Sex Offenders Registration Act, which is now being examined. Along with the findings of the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry, the Commission’s report will be used to inform and design improvements to operational practices, policies and laws in respect of sex offender management and child protection in Victoria.

In Victoria many professional groups already make reports to statutory child protection services. The government has secured agreement to work with the Commonwealth and other states and territories to assess existing mandatory reporting approaches. This will give us the ability to consider extending mandatory reporting obligations to further professional groups and for non-government organisations and whether this would result in greater protection for vulnerable children.

The government has recently announced a Parliamentary inquiry into matters relating to the handling of alleged criminal abuse of children by religious and other non-government organisations. This inquiry will consider the policies, practices and protocols that apply to the handling of allegations of criminal abuse of children within such organisations and make recommendations as to how these matters should be handled in the future.

**A Victorian Children’s Court that is focussed on children**

The legal system can be a lengthy and unduly stressful process for vulnerable children and their families. Legislation will be amended so that, when matters proceed to court, children will no longer be required to attend court unless they express a wish to do so. Currently, children frequently attend court after being removed from their parent’s care where there are immediate concerns for their safety.

The government will also modernise the language of the Children, Youth and Families Act to remove outdated terms that make vulnerable children and their families feel like they are subject to criminal proceedings.

The government will also confirm that the standard of proof in the Children’s Court Family Division is the civil ‘balance of probabilities’ standard, and not the criminal standard or any higher standard.

The Children’s Court’s procedures will be reformed to emphasise approaches that focus on future solutions to disputes rather than adversarial formalities. Unless there are urgent safety issues, the government will seek to resolve protective concerns with the child’s parents through discussion and
negotiation. Innovative forms of alternative dispute resolution such as New Model Conferencing will reduce the need for formal court processes. The government will give further consideration to the inclusion of Child Safety Conferences as an alternative dispute resolution process.

Improvements will be made to case allocation processes in the Children’s Court, which will assist with the timely progress of matters and their consideration by magistrates with specialist training, for example in relation to sexual abuse victims.

The government will make legislative changes to strengthen the Children’s Court’s capacity to make trials less adversarial. Disputes will be able to be resolved through discussions between the magistrate, the child’s family and the Department of Human Services to identify what has gone wrong and how best to develop a solution for the future. The Family Court of Australia introduced the Less Adversarial Trial model a number of years ago and it is generally regarded as having been successful.

Children and their families struggle to understand complex court orders. The government will consider how the range of orders and the number of conditions imposed by these orders can be simplified and reduced.

The government will give consideration to the creation of a specialist list in the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) to better manage administrative appeals against case management decisions by the Department of Human Services. VCAT provides a less formal setting than a court to resolve such issues.

Services where children need them

The location of the Melbourne Children’s Court often requires families and children to travel significant distances. As a result, there is a high volume of cases heard at the Court that results in overcrowding, undue stress for vulnerable children and families and a consequent lack of functionality of the Court. The government is committed to easing the pressures at the Melbourne Children’s Court, starting with the establishment of a new Children’s Court facility at Broadmeadows Magistrates’ Court.

The new Broadmeadows facility will be used to introduce better practices within the Children’s Court jurisdiction, which can then be applied more broadly.

The current processes and location of the Children’s Court Clinic do not adequately meet the needs of vulnerable children and families. The government will address the serious failings of the Children’s Court Clinic so that the Court is informed by best clinical assessment practices.

Victoria Police will continue to improve its responses to victims of family violence by focussing on the impact on children who are present and witness such violence. This will include further enhancing the responses of the Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams and the establishment of additional Family Violence Teams across the state to better identify children at risk.

The government is committed to ensuring that all interested parties are provided with up-to-date training programs. Existing multi-disciplinary training programs will be enhanced to enable legal practitioners, child protection workers and magistrates to be kept up to date with the most recent research findings.
MAKING A CHILD FRIENDLY LEGAL SYSTEM

ACTION AREA 3

Delivering a less adversarial legal system

> Establishing a New Children’s Court in Broadmeadows, which will be child friendly, accessible and conducive to less adversarial discussions for decision making that is in the best interests of children.

> New Model Conferencing will be expanded to try and resolve most protective concerns by negotiation, before entering into adversarial procedures for a protective application.

> Children in the Family Division will no longer be required to attend court unless they wish to.

> The government will address the identified failings in the current governance, quality assurance, structure, statutory processes and location of the Children’s Court Clinic.

Strong laws to protect children from abuse and neglect

> Laws will be reformed to protect children from predatory sexual behaviour such as being ‘groomed’ to be abused, including online grooming.

> Amending the Sex Offenders Registration Act 2004 and Serious Sex Offenders (Detention and Supervision) Act 2009 to have a greater focus on the protection of children, families and the community.

> A Parliamentary Inquiry will be conducted into matters relating to the handling of alleged criminal abuse of children by religious and other organisations.

> Improved responses to victims of family violence by focussing on the impact on children who are present and witness this violence through continuing to enhance the responses of the Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams and the commitment to establish additional Family Violence Teams across the 21 divisions of Victoria Police.
Providing Safe, Stable and Supportive Out-of-Home Care

Action Area 4

When parents abuse or neglect their children and the children are removed from their family homes, the collective resources of government become a substitute for the family.

On any given night in Victoria, an average of 6,400 children and young people under the age of 18 are living in out-of-home care. Each year, around 400 of these young people turn 18 and must transition to living independently.

The number of children in care is growing, largely because children are staying longer in care. The number of Aboriginal children in care, in particular, has increased dramatically over the past decade.

Managing this growth and ensuring that children in care — whether they live with other family members, foster carers, in group residential care, or are transitioning from care — are safe, stable and well supported is a major challenge.

While the statutory responsibility and guardianship for children in out-of-home-care legally sits with the Secretary of the Department of Human Services, in practice, the delivery of care that a family would generally provide is shared by government and government-funded community service organisations.

These are some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children in the state, and across the board they experience life outcomes which are well below the aspirations and achievements of the broader population.

Improved oversight, collaboration, and understanding, between Victoria’s health, education and statutory child protection systems is vital to improving the future for these children. Collaboration between professionals across many sectors will be needed to ensure their wellbeing.

The Victorian Government intends to develop a five year plan for out-of-home-care. The plan will set out actions across government to improve outcomes and achieve the targets that will be articulated in the final vulnerable children and families strategy. A long term goal will also be a reduction in the growth in the number of children in care to match and not exceed Victoria’s overall population growth.

A complementary five year plan for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care will also be developed, which will take into account the importance of maintaining strong connections to family and community. This plan will be consistent with the strengthened Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework, which will drive a stronger whole of government response to improving the social well-being and economic participation of Aboriginal Victorians. The new Commission for Children and Young People (see Action Area 5) will have a Commissioner with special responsibility for Aboriginal children. This Commissioner will have input into the development of this plan.

The Victorian Government will draw together a package of government services to support children and young people in out-of-home care in their daily living. That means we will look at other services we provide, such as housing or access to recreational facilities and programs, to simplify and reduce barriers to access and participation for out-of-home care clients.

Children in out-of-home care currently receive special access to dental and mental health services and school supports. More needs to be done to better understand barriers to access and to be more consistent across the spectrum of services and across the state. Work in this area will focus on identifying the existing barriers to access, and potential mechanisms to overcome them.

The following actions, either commenced in the past twelve months or to start in 2012-13, and the longer-term commitments that follow, set out how the government intends to manage demand and improve the stability, health and educational outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care.
Strengthening families and placement prevention
As a general principle, the best place for a child to be raised is with their family.

Where families are troubled and struggling, they should be assisted to help care for and protect their children. The government’s aim and priority is to help families stay together and to prevent problems escalating to child abuse or neglect.

The government has been trialling a new family support initiative in four locations. This ‘family coaching’ program has offered intensive case work support to families who have come to the attention of the child protection system and whose children are at imminent risk of being placed in out-of-home care. The trial has had promising results and preliminary data shows that this form of specific intervention targeting vulnerable families can vastly improve the home environment for children, reducing the need to remove children and enabling family reunifications.

The trial sites will be continued and expanded to a further two high-need locations as the Stronger Families initiative.

Therapeutic care and healing
Young people living in residential care often have very complex needs and behaviours as a result of extreme emotional or physical trauma before being removed from their family home.

While residential care workers strive to provide a caring and normal environment for these young people, they don’t always have the specialist skills required to actively respond and treat severely traumatised children.

In response to this need, the government has been trialling an innovative model of residential care that aims to not just respond to complex behaviours but to proactively reduce the impact of abuse and neglect.

In ‘therapeutic’ residential care, the staff are trained and qualified to deal with trauma and have the specialist skills, knowledge, training and support to provide highly personalised care.

Trials of this model have demonstrated significant benefits, including improvements in school engagement and achievement, social skills, and reductions in anti-social behaviour including substance abuse.

The Therapeutic Residential Care program is to be continued and refined in the existing locations and expanded to increase therapeutic capacity from 40 to approximately 140 placements. This expansion will include specific new services to be provided by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations for Aboriginal children and young people.

Further consideration is being given to what opportunities for a therapeutic or trauma-informed approach exist in settings across other government and funded services that work with traumatised children, young people and their families.

Services across education, justice, health and human services will use best practice and evidence-based approaches in the provision of services and support for traumatised children and young people and strengthen the use of therapeutic approaches across a range of sectors.

To help with maintaining a child’s history when they are in out-of-home care, the Department of Human Services will continue to support the Who Am I? project which helps children and young people to access all records of relevance to them and, as appropriate, be provided with a personal record when leaving care.
Demand and placement stability

As the number of children needing out-of-home placements continues to grow, the government is responding to the increase in out-of-home care demand by funding additional residential care placements. These extra placements will mean that there should be less need to move children around within the system, allowing them greater opportunity for stability, healthy development, and reducing the risk of re-traumatisation.

For those children for whom a permanent arrangement (adoption, permanent care or family law court order) is identified as the best course of action, timeliness is essential. Delays that can span multiple years can have significant implications for a child’s chance of being successfully placed in a permanent arrangement.

The government is, as a matter of urgency, establishing a time-limited Permanent Care and Stability Project. This project will use a specially selected team of specialist senior practitioners to examine the case plan of every child under 10 years old who is currently in the statutory system and who has been in care for an extended period. The teams will confirm if reunification is not viable and work to resolve any barriers to establishing a permanent arrangement.

It is expected that these teams will be taking more children’s cases before the Children’s Court for a timely decision to be made about their permanent placement.

In addition to resolving individual cases the team will be tasked with identifying the underlying causes of these delays with a view to developing permanent systemic improvements. The capacity of the Aboriginal permanent care program will also be increased to address the backlog in the assessments and court reports required prior to the making of the permanent care order for an Aboriginal child.

Foster carers are an important part of the out-of-home care system. The government will continue to provide regular training for foster carers and explore new ways to recruit and support them. More broadly, Victoria has also secured agreement that the Commonwealth will explore the current barriers within the tax and industrial relations systems that prevent the establishment of a professional model of foster care.

Better health

Health outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care are significantly worse than for the general population.

As a result of the experience of abuse and neglect, the health needs (including physical, mental and dental health) of these children have been almost universally neglected prior to their entering out-of-home care. Once in care, we have struggled to provide basic and remedial services. Only about one-third of young people entering residential care have received a basic health assessment.

The government has now committed that every young person entering residential out-of-home care will receive a comprehensive individual assessment of their health needs, followed by targeted support.

Better health care for children entering care will move Victoria more closely into line with the National Standards for Children in Out-of-home-care, which recommend that children and young people entering care have their health needs assessed and receive specialised services to respond to their health challenges.

More broadly, Victoria continues to advocate and has recently secured a commitment from the Commonwealth to work collaboratively across federal government departments and with the states to explore the establishment of a new item on the Medicare Benefits Scheme specifically for health assessments for children and young people in out-of-home care.

As part of the five year plan for children in out-of-home care we are committed to improving access for vulnerable children and families to mainstream and targeted services; in particular we are committed to developing a way to improve access to these important services for children in out-of-home care.
Better schooling
Another key area that affects the life chances of children and young people in out-of-home care is going to school. Disengagement from education is an issue for these children and this profoundly impacts their life outcomes.

To ensure that young children in out-of-home care can thrive and learn in early childhood settings, the government will explore new mechanisms — with local government and our other service delivery partners — to deliver focussed attention on their needs.

For school-age children and young people, the government has committed that every young person entering residential out-of-home care will receive a comprehensive individual educational needs assessment, followed by targeted support.

Further, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development will be working to improve the education outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care through:

> Regular monitoring and reporting on the enrolment and educational attainment of children and young people in out-of-home care through the Student Mapping Tool.
> Increased focus and improved protocols to support coordination and communication between schools and other key professionals in the lives of children in out-of-home care.

In addition, the government will ensure that a learning mentor is provided for each child in out-of-home care who is enrolled in school.

This is part of the government’s Education Support Guarantee, which commits to making children and young people in out-of-home care a priority for schools and for related health and wellbeing services.

Leaving care
Once a young person reaches the age of 18 they are considered to be an adult. Protection orders expire and the statutory child protection system no longer provides care.

This transition to independence can be extremely difficult for young people many, of whom have complex needs and don’t have a year 12 certificate.

To assist with the transition, particularly from residential care, the government has established the new Springboard program to provide specialist outreach and intensive one-on-one ongoing support to help young care-leavers (up to age 21) make informed choices about their education and training, find jobs and actively participate in the workforce. Springboard will also make funding available to help with education and training expenses, equipment, transportation, individual tuition and other relevant supports.

‘Zero-fee’ training places will be made available for young Victorians living in out-of-home care under the custody or guardianship of the state. Zero-fee training places will also be made available for any Victorians aged 21 or under who have recently transitioned from out-of-home care, having previously been under the custody or guardianship of the state. This will allow these vulnerable young people to achieve the kind of education that will assist them to become active and engaged adults in the community.

For those children exiting care, the Victorian Government is going to further strengthen supports, including funding to Aboriginal-specific services to provide support for young Aboriginal people transitioning from state care.

To improve our understanding of the challenges and outcomes for young people leaving out-of-home care, in mid-2012 a four year longitudinal research study on the life outcomes of young people transitioning from state care will commence. This study will track a cohort of young people transitioning from out-of-home care to help government better determine specifically how these young people may be better supported and assisted.
**PROVIDING SAFE, STABLE AND SUPPORTIVE OUT-OF-HOME CARE**

**ACTION AREA 4**

**Better outcomes for children in care**

- Significantly expanded *Therapeutic Residential Care* placements will provide specialist care for traumatised children and young people. This kind of care achieves significant improvements in school success, social skills, and reducing anti-social behaviour including substance abuse.

- The *Permanent Care and Stability Project* will set up teams to work out which children in the child protection system could be moved into permanent placements sooner.

- *Education and Health Assessments* will be rolled out for children and young people in out-of-home-care to improve their health, educational engagement and life chances.

- The Victorian Government will work with the Commonwealth to address the tax and industrial relations barriers to establishing a *professional model of foster care*.

- The *Stronger Families* initiative will be expanded to provide intensive support enabling families to provide a safe and supportive home for their children.

- New ways will be developed to *improve access to mainstream and targeted services for children and young people in out-of-home care*.

**Improving the experience of leaving state care**

- The *Springboard program* aims to support young people living in residential out-of-home care to access more support, education or training, to increase their chances of sustainable employment.

- *'Zero-fee' training places* will be made available for Victorians aged 21 or under who are in, or have recently transitioned from, out-of-home care to help them engage with further education and training.
INTRODUCING ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

ACTION AREA 5

Hiding problems will not make them go away. To drive improvement in outcomes for vulnerable children there needs to be a wholesale improvement in the accountability and transparency of the support provided and outcomes achieved for vulnerable children and their families.

The vulnerable children and families strategy will be underpinned by a performance framework to drive long-term improvement.

Victoria already has some important elements in place to drive this improvement, but these will need to be refocussed on vulnerable children and families.

New approaches will include a strengthening of reporting frameworks and improvements in the quality and consistency of the data within and across government and government funded services.

Victoria will also use the National Standards for Out-of-home care as a benchmark for our performance. These thirteen standards focus on the key factors that directly influence better outcomes for those living in out-of-home care.

We will establish a Commission for Children and Young People to provide the mechanisms to oversee performance in these areas and enable government to assess progress. This Commission will include a particular focus on Aboriginal children’s needs.

At a service delivery level, the Department of Human Services will improve the accountability and transparency of its programs and funded services. Government departments and community service organisations will be made more accountable for delivering services and for the results they achieve.

The following actions underway or commencing in 2012-13, and the longer-term commitments that follow, set out how the government will ensure sustained attention to vulnerable children, and will support this with the transparency and accountability mechanisms needed to continue improvement.

A vulnerable children and families strategy

To guide effort across government, a vulnerable children and families strategy to be known as Victoria’s Vulnerable Children – Our Shared Responsibility is to be developed.

The strategy will deliver a clear and agreed definition and understanding of ‘vulnerability’ for children and families in Victoria. This new definition will help all Victorian Government services determine who needs extra help and attention.

It will also include a performance framework that covers all relevant Victorian Government departments and services. A particular focus will be on improving outcomes for children in the out-of-home-care system and vulnerable Aboriginal children and families, with clear links to the revised Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework to be released in 2012. Long-term targets will be included in a five year plan for out-of-home-care to ensure complex and challenging issues are tackled.
**Commission for Children and Young People**

A key action to improve the transparency and accountability mechanisms to ensure sustained attention to vulnerable children will be the establishment of a Commission for Children and Young People.

This Commission, which will replace the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner, will have a role in overseeing and monitoring the implementation of the vulnerable children and families strategy.

The existing Victorian Child Death Review process will be coordinated through the Commission but the current structure and review process will be streamlined and improved.

Commissioners will be appointed, including one with special responsibility for vulnerable Aboriginal children and young people and overseeing the five year plan for Aboriginal children in out-of-home-care.

**Children’s Services Coordination Board**

The Children’s Services Coordination Board will continue to report to government but with a strengthened role and a sharper focus on improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children in our community.

The Board, which comprises all relevant Departmental Secretaries and the Chief Commissioner of Police, will:

> Assist Ministers in preparing the vulnerable children and families strategy
> Oversee its implementation at a departmental level, and
> Monitor performance through the production of biennial strategies to target responses to the needs of vulnerable children and young people.

The Children’s Services Coordination Board will also have a close relationship with the Secretaries’ Leadership Group on Aboriginal Affairs, which oversees the broader reforms aimed at closing the gap in outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians.

**Victorian Children’s Council**

At a whole of government level, the Victorian Children’s Council (VCC) will be better utilised. The VCC is a group of recognised experts in children’s policy and services, which provides high-level policy advice to the Premier, the Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development and the Minister for Community Services.

The Council will support a stronger whole-of-government response to vulnerable children and their families as part of the government’s reform agenda. The government will better utilise the skills, knowledge and expertise of the Council and more tailored and useful provision of advice to the Premier and to Ministers, in accordance with the directions set out in the vulnerable children and families strategy.

**Accountability of community service organisations**

Standards and review processes are an important mechanism to ensure government provides quality services that deliver positive client outcomes.

As of July 2012, all community service organisations funded through the Department of Human Services will have to be accredited by an independent review body once every three years, and will need to demonstrate that they comply with the new Department of Human Services Standards.

These standards are structured in accordance with current quality standard practices and are structured around the themes of empowerment; access and engagement; well-being; and participation. Aboriginal cultural competence is strongly featured.

The new standards will help to ensure a consistent quality of service no matter which DHS-funded service people access.

For government’s part, we have cut red tape by reducing the existing four standards into one, and we will be making it clearer what’s needed from community service organisations.
Other methods to boost accountability will be facilitated through improved inspections and increased public reporting on actions taken against under-performing organisations which may affect the quality of care provided to vulnerable children.

To make sure that the regulation of community service organisations remains transparent and effective, the organisational restructure of the Department of Human Services will separate the regulatory functions of government from the areas responsible for child protection and family services policy and funding.

Knowing what works
The government is committed to a renewed and improved focus on improving the outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people, including preventing abuse and better responses to substantiated cases of abuse of Aboriginal children.

Improved information, data and data sharing between and within government departments around vulnerable children from Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is a key step towards addressing the over-representation of these children in the child protection and out-of-home care systems.

We don’t know enough about the stress factors being experienced by culturally and linguistically diverse families or the types of support they need to address the issues that have lead children from some communities to be over-represented in out-of-home care.

The government is adapting the IT system used for clients of statutory child protection to improve knowledge and data on child protection clients from different backgrounds, to record and provide better information to assist case workers assisting vulnerable children and families, and to improve aggregate information and monitoring of the outcomes these children and families are achieving.

The government will make data collection on the health and wellbeing of refugee and other recent immigrant children, young people and families a priority for future State of Victoria’s Children reports.

We will work through the Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System (VCAMS) towards developing a specialist data collection on recent migrant and refugee children, and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Human Services will collaborate to share and improve data on outcomes for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in out-of-home care or known to child protection. We will also use VCAMS to focus on areas with severe disadvantage as a means of strengthening both prevention and responses to vulnerable Aboriginal children. The Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework will also emphasise localised responses to closing the gap in areas of severe disadvantage.

The Federal and State Community Services Ministers are also taking action to improve the accountability mechanisms to support vulnerable children and families through the second three year action plan currently being developed for the implementation of the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children. Victoria has secured agreement that this plan will have a specific focus on culturally and linguistically diverse communities, particularly recent arrivals, by ensuring that culturally and linguistically diverse communities are considered across each of the action areas in the Framework.

Child and Family Services Outcomes Survey
The Child and Family Services Outcomes Survey is one of the key mechanisms for evaluating out-of-home-care and related statutory child protection and family services initiatives. It explores the attitudes of vulnerable children, young people and their carers and parents regarding their experiences and perceived outcomes following involvement with family services, child protection or placement services. The survey asks participants about the outcomes achieved (for example, whether the child’s health and wellbeing has improved) and also asks about the responsiveness and accessibility of services in general.

The government is considering what further opportunities there are for the Child and Family Services Outcomes Survey to be used in conjunction with other service data to evaluate the value of developing a more complete picture.
INTRODUCING ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

ACTION AREA 5

Driving stronger accountability for what we achieve

> A new Commission for Children and Young People will be established and monitor government departments and the community sector to ensure they are working effectively to keep vulnerable children and young people safe.

> The Children’s Services Coordination Board will coordinate the development, implementation and monitoring of the vulnerable children and families strategy, and report on its progress to the new Commission and the Ministerial committee.

Shared responsibility for vulnerable children

> A whole of government vulnerable children and families strategy will detail how the government will aim to prevent child abuse and neglect, reduce its negative impact and improve outcomes for vulnerable children and young people.

> A performance framework will be developed for all relevant Victorian Government departments and agencies, to track our progress in improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families across Victoria.

> Targeted and effective use of data between government departments about vulnerable children from Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
Victoria needs to do better to protect our vulnerable children.

It’s a big job but the Coalition Government has already started. We have provided a significant funding boost across our first two budgets and a comprehensive, broad first set of actions across the whole of government.

We are planning for the next steps, and working in a strategic and systematic way to fix the problems. We will have these policies well underway and a final strategy completed by 2013.

We are strongly focussed on changing the experience and life trajectory of vulnerable children and families.

We are striving to join up services, coordinate what we do and keep a focus on the outcomes.

We know that the issues faced by vulnerable children and families are often deeply entrenched and complex, and improving their situations will require sustained and coordinated effort over a long period of time.

But we are committed to delivering better outcomes and we are ready for our part of the challenge.

The Coalition Government believes this Directions Paper represents a comprehensive step forward for some long overdue improvements and enhancements across the spectrum of Victorian services to protect vulnerable children. We look forward to working with the community sector on the roll-out of the changes outlined, and to continue thinking about innovative ways to prevent abuse and neglect, as well as how to respond most effectively when it occurs.

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Accessibility

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