



COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN  
AND YOUNG PEOPLE

# State-wide residential care monitoring program: **clothing and luggage**

October - December 2022

CCYPD/23/1599



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## Executive summary

The *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* identifies that the Secretary, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (the department) has a responsibility to publish and promote a Charter for children in out-of-home care (the Charter) to provide a framework of principles to promote the wellbeing of those children.<sup>1</sup>

The Commission for Children and Young People (the Commission) conducts a residential care monitoring program. The program involves visits to a selection of residential care homes to collect the views and experiences of children and young people about a right, or group of similar rights, under the Charter.

This monitoring activity focused on children and young people's access to clothing while they are living in residential care. The topic was chosen following discussions with young people with lived experience in care and consultation with our Youth Council.<sup>2</sup>

The findings are based on the views of children and young people living at eight selected residential care homes in October, November and December 2022.

It is important that children and young people in residential care have reasonable amounts of clothing so that they can attend school and participate in a range of activities in differing weather conditions. The monitoring activity also considered whether children and young people had their own luggage and how their clothes were cleaned, mended and stored.

The Charter rights relevant to this monitoring activity are as follows:

- to be allowed to be a child and treated with respect
- to have a worker who is there for me
- to have fun and do activities that I enjoy
- if I am an Aboriginal child, to feel proud and strong in my own culture.<sup>3</sup>

## Key findings

Across divisions, the Commission found a significant difference between departmental policy and operational practice regarding the provision of clothing for children and young people in out-of-home care.

The Commission found that the lack of clarity and detail in the department's current policies and guidance caused confusion and resulted in highly varied practice between service providers. Children, young people and service providers do not have a common understanding of entitlements and process related to clothing and luggage.

## Access to new clothing

Most children and young people said they had to ask staff if they wanted new clothing. Some children and young people said they did not feel comfortable asking staff for new clothing due to anxiety, concerns that they would not be believed or having had negative experiences with prior requests.

While the department has no prescribed amount of funding for clothing or a clothing allowance policy, most children and young people referred to being allocated some form of

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<sup>1</sup> See section 16(1)(f) of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*.

<sup>2</sup> The Commission Youth Council is made of a small group of young people with diverse experiences, aged between 15 and 24.

<sup>3</sup> See: 'Charter for children in out-of-home care' at <https://services.dffh.vic.gov.au/charter-children-out-home-care>.

quarterly clothing allowance by service providers. Some children and young people told the Commission that they did not regularly receive their clothing allowance, or there were delays.

None of the children and young people we spoke to were clear about the amount of money they were entitled to receive for clothing, or with what frequency they could expect funds to be available.

There also appeared to be confusion about care providers' responsibilities when children and young people were receiving additional funding through Centrelink. Some children and young people spoke about having to use their Centrelink funds or Abstudy allowance to purchase clothes rather than being funded by service providers. Others spoke about receiving clothes from family and friends.

Most children and young people said they thought it was very important to have enough clothing, but half of the participants said they did not think they had enough clothes.

Several children and young people told the Commission their clothes did not fit them, largely due to growth spurts associated with adolescence.

Children and young people talked about wanting a variety of clothing, including clothes for different temperatures, 'dressy clothes' to go out, swimwear, underwear and nightwear. At only one of the houses visited by the Commission were the two children completely happy with the clothes they had.

#### **Access to clothing – school uniforms**

Most participants said they had clothing to wear to school, however some children and young people spoke about not having enough school uniforms, having clothing of the wrong size or needing new school shoes.

The Commission's systemic inquiry into the education experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care, currently underway, is examining if children and young people in care have the resources they need for school, including uniforms.

#### **Clothing for social activities, sports and leisure activities**

Very few children and young people spoke about participating in structured sport and extracurricular activities. Of those who were involved in activities, most said they had the clothes needed to participate in sports and leisure activities.

Some children told the Commission they were did not have sport shoes, swimwear, and clothes to attend parties.

#### **Children and young people's access to clothes celebrating their culture**

One third of the children who spoke to the Commission identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and seven children identified as being from cultural backgrounds other than Australian.<sup>4</sup>

Participants told the Commission that any clothes they had that celebrated or recognised their culture were from attending free events, from family or Aboriginal services. None of these children and young people had been provided clothes that recognised or celebrated their culture from their care providers.

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<sup>4</sup> Three of the children who identified as being of cultural backgrounds other than Australian also identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

### Taking care of clothing

Most children and young people said it was very important to have clean clothes and most said they washed their own clothes. Some children and young people said that staff assisted them with laundering their clothes, which they said made them feel cared for.

### Luggage

Overall, the Commission found that the quality and size of the luggage held by children and young people was poor. Children had bags that were too small for their belongings or suitcases that were broken or in poor condition.

### Safety and storage

A small number of children told the Commission they were concerned about their clothes being stolen by co-residents. Two participants said they didn't leave their clothes unattended outside of their room for this reason.

This issue, and the potential benefits of having privacy locks on bedrooms across the residential care system, was raised in 2019 through the Commission's residential care monitoring program.<sup>5</sup>

During the adverse comment process, the department advised the Commission that a departmental audit conducted in December 2022 identified that 202 out of 207 residential care properties had privacy locks installed for children and young people's bedrooms. The department advised that privacy locks will be installed in the remaining five residential care properties following consultation with the young people and their respective service provider.

The department further advised that the installation of privacy locks for bedrooms has been incorporated into design specifications for new residential care home builds and guidelines for the use and installation of privacy locks is currently being developed.

### Knowledge of the Charter for children in out-of-home care

In each of our monitoring activities we ask children and young people if they know about the Charter. In this monitoring activity, less than half of the children and young people who spoke to the Commission (6 of 15, or 40 per cent) were aware of the Charter.

The Charter was displayed in most homes; however, children and young people told the Commission that Charter rights were not often discussed with them. In the Commission's earlier monitoring activity in 2022, the Commission identified an opportunity for the department and service providers to further promote the Charter and discuss with children and young people in out-of-home care how they can use it.<sup>6</sup> The Commission has not been advised of any action taken in relation to this suggestion.

In this monitoring activity, most of the houses did not have a clear approach for children to raise issues or make requests, separate to the department's complaint process.<sup>7</sup> This is concerning, particularly in the context of the new Child Safe Standards, introduced in July 2022, which expressly require organisations to have child-focused processes for complaints and concerns.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Commission for Children and Young People, October 2019, 'A home that feels like a home'.

<sup>6</sup> Commission for Children and Young People, June 2022, 'To stay healthy and well and go to a doctor, dentist or other health professional for help when they need to'.

<sup>7</sup> Viewpoint out-of-home care survey and the out-of-home care outcomes survey.

<sup>8</sup> See [New Child Safe Standards Information Sheet.DOCX \(ccyp.vic.gov.au\)](#).

Children and young people told us that they want opportunities to talk about their rights and decisions that affect them while living in residential care, but that they do not know how to raise issues and make requests.

## Opportunities for improvement

The Commission has identified the following opportunities for improvement from the findings of this monitoring activity:

1. That the department review and improve the current guidelines for service providers' provision of clothing for children and young people while living in residential care are. The guidelines should be clear as to the need for:
  - ongoing review and provision of a sufficient quantity of clothing that fits each child and young person, and allows them to participate in a range of activities, in a range of weather conditions
  - obligations of service providers in the context of children and young people who receive additional income/payments
  - adequate provision of school uniforms
  - the provision of suitable luggage for overnight/short stays and to leave care.
2. That the department develop child-friendly information describing the amount, variety and type of clothing and luggage children and young people should expect care providers to provide while living in out-of-home care.
3. That the department provide the Commission with ongoing and regular advice about strategies to promote and embed the Charter for children and young people in out-of-home care.

In addition, following feedback from service providers, the Commission suggests:

4. That the department develop specific guidance on expectations regarding supports provided to children and young people first entering the out-of-home care system, with roles and responsibilities clearly identified.
5. That the department consider a flexible brokerage model for children and young people's clothing and luggage; this would operate in addition to current placement funding arrangements and enable extra expenditure when that is required to meet a child's individual needs.

The Commission encourages the department to consider these suggestions when reviewing, and improving, the current policy settings and guidance for service providers.

## Our thanks

The Commission appreciated the contributions of the children and young people who generously shared their time and views.

The Commission also appreciated the support of service providers, who took great care assisting the monitoring team in its preparations and supporting our engagement with children and young people. The support and co-operation of the department's divisional representatives and central staff also contributed to the success of this activity.



## Background

The Commission's residential care monitoring program collects the views and experiences of children and young people in residential care about a right, or group of similar rights, under the Charter. One of the aims of the Commission's residential care monitoring program is to promote the understanding and use of the Charter. The Commission's monitoring program also aims to provide the Minister and the department with insights into the experiences and views of a group of randomly selected children and young people in Victoria's residential care system, to inform service improvements.

Prior to this activity, the Commission has conducted three previous monitoring activities:

- an onsite visit in 2019 focused on the Charter right to 'have a home that feels like a home'
- an online activity in 2021 considered children and young people's views on their right to 'a worker who is there for me' and 'to be provided with information'
- a series of onsite visits in April and May 2022 focused on the Charter right 'to stay healthy and well and go to a doctor, dentist or other health professional for help when they need to'.

## Methodology

The monitoring program identified eight residential care homes to be visited, selected against the following criteria:

- two locations from each Division of the department
- four metropolitan locations and four regional locations
- eight different out-of-home care service providers
- excluding locations involved in previous monitoring activities.

Floods in Victoria during October and November 2022 created unforeseen delays in the activity's scheduling of visits. The monitoring activity was intended to take place over a six-week period, however some visits needed to be rescheduled due to the floods.

There was one home where the Commission was not able to meet with any of the children and young people.

Further details about the activity's methodology can be found at Attachment 1.

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The Commission met with 15 of the 23 children and young people living at the seven locations, representing a 68 per cent participation rate. Of the children and young people we spoke to:

- the average age was 14 (range of 10 to 17 years of age)
- five were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- seven identified as being of CALD background
- seven were identified as living with disability
- eight identified as male, six identified as female, and one identified as non-binary.

There were eight children who did not participate, being:

- a 14-year-old non-verbal child who was unable to understand questions<sup>10</sup>
- three 16-year-old boys and one 16-year-old girl who were away from placement when Commission staff attended
- one nine-year-old boy and a 16-year-old girl who were at school or camp when Commission staff attended
- one non-binary 17-year-old who did not wish to participate.

The Commission encountered a greater proportion of children and young people absent/missing from placement in this monitoring activity than during previous onsite monitoring activities. This aligns with the data reported in the Commission’s Annual Report<sup>11</sup> that identified a 65 per cent increase in absent/missing incidents across all care types from 2019-2020 to 2021-2022.

For those who did not participate in the monitoring activity when Commission staff attended, service providers were advised that children or young people could participate online at a later date. None of the children and young people asked for this be arranged.

<sup>10</sup> Efforts were made to engage the child by Commission staff and staff at the location; however it was agreed that it would not be a good experience for the child to participate.

<sup>11</sup>. See 2021-2022 Annual Report CCYP p41.



To protect the privacy of individuals, this report does not identify a particular service provider connected to the children and young people's quotes, or the names, ages or genders of children and young people quoted or referenced.

## Findings

The Commission observed that most children and young people who participated in the interviews were appropriately clothed for the weather and were wearing clothes that looked reasonably new and clean.

### Current policy settings

The Commission identified several sources of policy and guidance relating to the provision of clothing in out-of-home care:

- Program requirements for residential care in Victoria
- Looking After Children (LAC) framework
- Child Protection (CP) Manual.

#### ***Program requirements for residential care in Victoria***

The Department's program requirements for residential care state that 'children will be clothed in a manner that complies with reasonable community standards and expectations.'<sup>12</sup> Service providers are required to meet these expectations using the funding with which they are provided.

The department has no prescribed amount for clothing, or a clothing allowance policy, and there is no policy requirement to provide children with luggage to transport clothing, or specific policy requirement relating to how children are to be supported to clean or mend clothes.

In response to the draft of this report, the department advised that service providers 'are expected to provide appropriate clothing and footwear or young people in care'[and]... 'in some exceptional circumstances, the department may contribute additional clothing expenses, for example through client support funding and brokerage.'

The department also advised that '[t]he department has committed 'to reconfirming these expectations with providers and providing greater clarity regarding the need or clothing to be appropriate for a range of purposes relevant to the young person and consideration to factors such as seasonality.'

When there is a placement change, program requirements state that staff from both placements are expected to: ensure the child's belongings and other materials are safely transferred to the subsequent placement; and that changes occur in a way that is sensitive to the needs of the child, ensuring they are involved in the process wherever possible.<sup>13</sup>

#### ***Looking After Children (LAC) framework***

In Victoria, the LAC provides a framework for considering how the needs of each child will be met while that child is living in out-of-home care.<sup>14</sup> The LAC framework considers the child's needs and outcomes across seven developmental domains, which includes social presentation.

<sup>12</sup> DHHS Program requirements for residential care in Victoria (October 2016), p32.

<sup>13</sup> DHHS Program requirements or residential care in Victoria (October 2016), p25.

<sup>14</sup> Looking After Children, Document ID number 2742, version 3, 20 June 2019.



The 'social presentation' domain specifically notes that a child's appearance affects how other people perceive and treat them and how these reactions will affect a child's self-esteem and self-confidence. The LAC framework acknowledges that young people need guidance and resources to present themselves in ways that help them to be positively regarded by their peers and adults.<sup>15</sup>

In the implementation of the LAC framework, consideration should be given to whether a young person has all the clothing they need,<sup>16</sup> including suitable clothes to wear at school, for sports, special occasions and going out with friends.<sup>17</sup> Each service provider is responsible for coordinating the LAC process for each child and completing the relevant records.

The department's Compliance and Quality performance audits uses the LAC framework as an assessment tool. Rather than checking for individual items, the audit team may make general observations about clothing children and young people have in the unit during an audit inspection. In circumstances where it appears that clothing in a child or young person's room is insufficient, the audit team requests a rationale for this from the service provider.

In 2020, the department suspended onsite inspections due to COVID-19 restrictions. Since then, staff shortages and recruitment processes have reduced the department's capacity to complete onsite inspections. The department have advised that inspections recommenced in February 2023, following the onboarding of new staff.

**Child Protection Manual**

The CP manual states that 'children and young people in out-of-home care should participate in normal and acceptable age-appropriate activities, as would their peers'.

The manual notes that the consideration must be given to 'relevant resources needed by the child or young person during activities', including 'appropriate clothing' and 'swimming costumes'.<sup>18</sup>

**Children and young people's experiences**

In semi-structured interviews, the Commission asked each child and young person a series of questions relating to clothes and luggage. Not all children and young people answered each question, and the number of responses received to each question has been noted.

**Quantity of clothing**

Most children and young people said it was very important to have enough clothing while living in residential care. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being very important), on average, children and young people said having enough clothing was '8 out of 10' in importance (12 responses).

Half of the participants said they either did not have enough clothes or could use more clothes (12 responses).

It is important to have enough clothes, especially if you need to chuck your clothes in the wash, you need to have backs ups to wear.

I don't have enough clothes. I need more and I need something nice to wear.

I need a little more undies and socks.

I have some shorts but could use some more.

<sup>15</sup> Looking After Children, Document ID number 2742, version 3, 20 June 2019.  
<sup>16</sup> Leaving care – advice, Document ID number 2111, version 2, 1 March 2016.  
<sup>17</sup> Looking After Children Assessment & Progress Record (10 years and older).  
<sup>18</sup> Participating in activities – advice. Document ID number 2132, version 3, 27 September 2018.

One young person spoke about the importance of having enough clothes to wear when their clothes were being washed. A young person spoke about needing at least two basic sets of clothes and another said they did not have enough essential items, such as underwear and socks.

Most children and young people had modest expectations when the Commission asked them about the amount of money they thought they needed for clothing. One participant said that there should be at least a new set of clothes per season, noting the fluctuating weather in Melbourne.

### ***Requesting clothes***

Children and young people generally said they needed to ask staff if they wanted new clothes and that sometimes they had to remind staff about pending requests.

Some children and young people said they did not feel comfortable asking staff for clothing. One participant spoke about feeling like staff did not believe they needed new clothes, another young person said they would not ask for new clothes because they wouldn't be good quality. Another young person said they would not feel comfortable to ask staff about clothing, because of their anxiety.

One young person told the Commission that if they needed new clothes or underwear, an email would need to be sent to the service provider's allocated worker, who would send it to the Child Protection allocated worker for approval.

While the department has no prescribed amount of funding for clothing or a clothing allowance policy, most children and young people spoke about being allocated a 'clothing allowance' per quarter or season by the service provider. The amount per quarter appeared to vary, from \$150 to \$400 per quarter/season. Some children and young people spoke about not receiving their clothing allowance, while others spoke about delays in receiving their allowance.

None of the children and young people were clear on what amount they were entitled to for clothing, or with what frequency they could expect funds to be available.

Service providers varied in their approach to providing clothes to children and young people. Some providers acknowledged that there was a lack of clarity about what children and young people were entitled to receive, others indicated that they understood that children and young people would ask for what they needed.

Only one of the seven houses visited by the Commission had good processes in place to ensure children consistently had the clothing they needed. These children also received additional clothing from their parents.

There appeared to be further confusion about entitlements to clothing from care providers when children and young people are receiving additional funding through Centrelink. Some children and young people spoke about receiving clothes from family and friends, either as the primary source of clothing or an additional source.

In response to the draft of this report, the department advised that: '[p]olicy expectations for Community Service Organisations are for children and young people to be clothed in line with reasonable community standards and expectations.

This includes adequate clothing that meets their needs during their time in care, without the need for Child Protection approval, except for specific circumstances, such as where the department is requested to contribute additional clothing expenses, for example through client support funding and brokerage.'

### ***Clothes that fit***

Children and young people told the Commission about being uncomfortable in clothes that did not fit them and commented on how young people quickly grow out of clothes during adolescence. One young person said “sometimes when you say you need new clothes, they don't believe you. You do grow out of them.”

Some young people spoke about difficulties with clothes not fitting due to rapid weight gain.

A group of children and young people were found to have retained quantities of clothing that no longer fitted them. The collection of clothing that no longer fits by some children may indicate a sense of scarcity.

None of the children and young people spoke about receiving support from staff to get rid of clothes that no longer fit them or spoke of proactive support to refresh and update their clothes.

### ***School uniforms***

Commission staff spoke to some children and young people who said they did not need a school uniform because they were being tutored, or because they chose not to wear a uniform. One child said they did not have to wear a school uniform to school, however they said they did not have enough regular clothes to wear to school.

Other participants spoke about needing school shoes, having the wrong sized uniforms or not enough uniforms.

One participant spoke about how they were treated differently at school without the correct uniform and that they had, at times, not attended school when they didn't have the correct uniform.

Concerns about access to school uniform and equipment have also been raised by children and young people consulted for the Commission's current inquiry into the education experiences of children and young people out-of-home care.

Half of my clothes are too small. They don't fit.

I only have one pair of shoes that fit and ones that do not fit.

I have enough clothes, but some don't fit

I like 'warm and baggy' clothes as it's 'comfortable'.

I never wear tight clothes" Some of my clothes are tight - they don't fit me anymore.

It's uncomfortable wearing tight clothes.

I need more school clothes. When I didn't have the right clothes I just didn't go to school.

School uniforms are given [to me] by school.

I have one pair of pants which is too big, a polo that doesn't fit and one jacket.

I have no proper shirts. They're all medium size from when I was 12, about 5 years ago. The only shirt I have got is my school shirt. Most of my t-shirts are tight.

### ***Clothing for social activities, sports and leisure activities***

Some children and young people spoke about participating in dance, gymnastics, footy, fishing, lifeguarding and work.

Most children and young people said they had the clothes needed to participate in sports and leisure activities.

Children and young people spoke about needing a variety of clothes while living in residential care including tracksuits, hoodies, jumpers, t-shirts, shorts, jeans, shirts, long sleeve tops, dresses, puffers, rainwater jackets, school uniforms, swimwear, footy boots, socks, underwear, slippers, sunglasses and 'dressy' clothes for interviews. Some participants spoke about how they did not have these items or did not have enough.

One child spoke about having to wear 'trackies' to the beach because they didn't have swimwear and they didn't have enough time or money to get swimwear for a particular planned activity.

One young person said if they were invited to a party, they would have 'nothing to wear'.

Another participant spoke about how teenagers want to try new clothes for new identities as they were learning about themselves (such as 'sporty' or 'goth') and how they don't have a chance to do this because of limited funds.

I need proper basketball shoes. I got 10 and a halves and I need 11 and a half. I just make do with what I have.

I need swimming shorts, footy boots and footy socks.

I have clothes to do gymnastics.

I want fancy clothes instead of shit clothes.

I want some dresses.

I don't have any dressy clothes beside one pair of nice pants which are my funeral pants. I wore it to a funeral so I'm not going to wear that around.

### ***Quality clothing***

On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being very important), on average children and young people said having good quality clothing was '7 out of 10' in importance (12 responses).

Most children and young people said staff take them to less expensive stores to buy clothes, such as Kmart or Jay Jays. Participants told the Commission that lower quality of clothes did not last, and that they would like a combination of good quality and less expensive clothes.

When the Commission asked what 'good quality clothing' meant to them, children and young people had a variety of interpretations, however, most spoke about style, fashion and brand items. When asked about good quality clothing, one child spoke about the poor condition of his shoes. One child said they had 'enough' clothes and that having 'good quality clothes' was not important to them: 'I've never been fussy'.

### ***Access to cultural clothing***

Five participants identified as being Aboriginal and seven participants identified as belonging to another culturally and linguistically diverse background. Three of the seven latter group of children also identified as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

The Commission asked these children how important it was for them to have clothing that celebrated their culture. One third said it was 'important', one third said it was 'very important' or 'extremely important' and one third said it was 'slightly important' or 'not important.'



Two Aboriginal children said they received clothing that celebrates their culture in their current placement from free events or Aboriginal services they attended.

One participant spoke about how they wanted clothing associated to their culture and that they would like to sew their own traditional clothing.

None of the children and young people indicated that they would ask workers for clothing that recognises or reflects their culture and cultural backgrounds.

It would be appropriate for service providers to consider opportunities to support children to celebrate or recognise their culture through their clothing.

I have free t-shirts from different events, like Victorian Aboriginal Health Services (VAHS).

I have a couple of indigenous t-shirts. I like to express my culture.

I just received a MDAS (Mallee District Aboriginal Services) top.

### ***Clothing - sentiment***

The Commission asked participants how they felt about the clothes they currently have:

- seven participants said they felt 'OK'
- three participants said they felt 'really good' or 'excellent'
- three said they felt 'not very good' or 'awful' (13 responses).

Participants were asked how they felt about being in public with the clothes they have:

- five participants said they felt 'OK'
- four participants said they felt 'really good' or 'excellent'
- four said they felt 'not very good' or 'awful' (13 responses).

Separate to these questions, three children and young people said they did not care about what other people thought about them and the clothes they wear.

### ***Taking care of clothing***

The Commission was keen to hear how children and young people in residential care took care of their clothes.

In 2014, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office released a report into 'Residential Care Services for Children'. In this report, children and young people with a lived experience in residential care spoke about how learning to use a washing machine, fold and repair clothes were useful life skills when leaving care.<sup>19</sup> The Commission was keen to hear how children and young people in residential care took care of their clothes.

The Commission asked children how important it is for them to have clean clothes to wear every day. Nine out of 13 participants said it was 'very important', three participants said it depended on the type of clothing, and one participant said it didn't matter.

Sometimes I put it in the washer. Sometimes staff do it.

I wash my own clothes. I do it on Saturdays.

I always have clean clothes because I don't have many clothes.

Staff might help with drying and folding.

<sup>19</sup> VAGO Report (2014) Residential Care Services for Children, page 19.

Children reported that their clothes were regularly washed, which was encouraging. Six participants said their clothes were washed weekly, four participants said after every wear and two participants said every couple of days (12 responses).

When asked about assistance received to wash and fold clothes, seven participants said they wash their own clothes, five participants said staff wash their clothes and one participant said it varied. It appeared that younger children were receiving support to wash and fold their clothes.

Some young people spoke about 'figuring out' the washing machine for themselves or asking another young person for help. Some participants said that some staff help them with folding clothes and leave them at the end of their bed which they described as 'nice' and 'mum-like'.

It would be appropriate for service providers to either directly support, or ensure guidance is provided to all children and young people about how to use washing facilities in residential care homes.

### ***Mending clothes***

Half of the participants said they could fix or repair an item of clothing, if they had access to basic mending equipment, while a small number of participants said they would need assistance.

Three young people said they didn't want assistance to repair their clothes, and one young person stated they would throw their clothes out if they were damaged.

One young person said they could fix their own clothes, and another young person said they could make their own culturally appropriate clothes; however, the Commission was told that there were no sewing machines, needles or thread available to mend clothes and it was unclear if staff would know how or be willing to help children and young people to mend their clothes.

It would be appropriate for service providers to provide children and young people with supervised opportunities to learn life skills, such as using a sewing machine to repair, alter and make clothes.

### ***Storing clothing***

One young person told the Commission that they do not leave their clothes outside their room because another child or young person would take them. The young person said even when they do leave their clothes in their room it is not always safe because sometimes staff unlock their bedrooms and do not secure them again.

One young person spoke about doing their own washing to make sure their clothes don't get stolen. Another young person spoke about how their clothes were stolen in a previous placement and had not been replaced, which meant they did not have many clothes when they met with Commission staff.

Staff don't know how to fix clothes and they won't let me have a needle or scissors.

I can sew but there is no sewing machine here.

I know how to repair my clothes. I have a needle and thread to do it.

There may be some staff who could help me fix or repair clothes. There are mothers here, you know - workers who have kids.



The Commission’s 2019 monitoring activity identified an opportunity for the department to clarify policy options for service providers to provide children and young people capacity to secure their own bedrooms (privacy locks).

A department audit conducted in December 2022 identified 202 out of 207 properties had privacy locks installed for children and young people’s bedrooms, with privacy locks to be installed in the remaining five residential care properties following consultation with the young people and their respective service providers.

The installation of privacy locks for bedrooms has been incorporated into design specifications for all new residential care homes builds and guidelines for the use and installation of privacy locks is currently being developed.

**Luggage**

The Commission wanted to know how children and young people’s clothes were transported between placements, when children and young people went on camps or short-trips or when they left care.

Not all the children and young people we spoke with had a suitcase or other type of luggage. One young person spoke of coming into care with clothes in plastic bags and moving between several placements the same way. The young person said they would like a suitcase.

When discussing placement changes, one young person spoke about how their clothes were left behind at a residential care unit and another young person spoke about how their clothes were left behind after the (then) recent floods.

Commission staff spoke to one young person who recently experienced an unplanned move from another residential care house, where staff had packed the young person's belongings. The young person was not happy with the process and said they were not allowed to go back to the previous residence to check that all their belongings had been packed.

Children and young people who had luggage spoke about bags or suitcases that they had from home or other family members, often which were either too small, or suitcases at the residential care house that were broken or not in good condition. One child spoke about using a suitcase found in the hard rubbish that was in good condition.

A bigger suitcase would be good. I used bags from the other resi when I came here. I used bags to fit all my stuff in.  
I did have a duffle bag, but it was stolen at another placement  
My clothes came in a garbage bag. Someone else had packed them for me. I have no suitcase.  
I would like a suitcase.  
I have a suitcase, but it is badly broken.  
One wheel fell off the big one, other than that the suitcases are all in good condition.

**The Charter for children in out-of-home care**

Commission staff observed the ‘Charter for children in out-of-home care’ displayed in each of the eight homes visited, however only six of the 15 children and young people who participated said that they were aware of the Charter before the Commission’s monitoring activity.

Only one of the five Aboriginal children and young people said they knew about the Charter. None of the children said they had used the Charter to advocate for themselves or recalled having discussed the rights in the charter with staff, case workers or their peers.

The level of knowledge and familiarity of the Charter has varied over the three monitoring activities, noting the sample of respondents is always small:

- in 2019, 80 per cent said they were aware of the Charter
- in 2021, 40 per cent said they were aware of the Charter
- in 2022, 55 per cent said they were aware of the Charter
- in 2022, (this visit) 43 per cent (6 of 15) said they were aware of the Charter.

When talking about the Charter, children and young people were consistently interested in participating in future conversations about their rights and decisions that impact on them whilst they are living in residential care.

As of 1 July 2022, service providers and the department were required to comply with a new set of Child Safe Standards,<sup>20</sup> which include the requirement that 'children and young people are empowered about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.'

The new legal requirement provides a further prompt to educate, and further integrate, the Charter into residential care operations and services.

### Consultation on the draft report

Before finalising this report, the Commission undertook a consultative process with the department and relevant residential care providers were provided relevant excerpts.

The Commission's draft findings received strong support from the service providers:

- ██████████ advised that it 'strongly supports the recommendations made in this report to improve policy and practice guidelines around clothing and luggage arrangements for children in residential care and to ensure there is consistent understanding and implementation across service providers'.
- ██████████ advised that the Commission's identified opportunities for improvement would 'help to provide greater clarity for service providers about the provision of clothing for children and young people while living in out-of-home care'.
- ██████████ advised that 'report's 'key findings are important ... given the importance of self-confidence and self-esteem, and the basic right of young people to be clothed properly'.
- ██████████ feedback was that report was 'consistent with the data collected and feedback ██████████ received following the interviews at the residential house'.
- ██████████ advised that they found the report 'very interesting and full of insight'.
- ██████████ described the report was 'very fair'.
- ██████████ 'found the whole process very informative and feedback received very positive ... they appreciated the comments and feedback from [Commission staff].. [and were] very thankful for the way the interviews were conducted with the young people and the flexibility provided around their needs'.

<sup>20</sup> ['Victoria's new Child Safe Standards' New Child Safe Standards Information Sheet.DOCX \(ccyp.vic.gov.au\)](#).

The Commission was encouraged to learn that several agencies had implemented their own improvement initiatives following their involvement in the monitoring activity:

- [REDACTED] advised that 'as a result of [the Commission's] visit [REDACTED] have undertaken a review of practice across [their] [REDACTED] residential care programs' and confirmed difference in expectation and practice between divisions.
- [REDACTED] advised that they had 'spoken with young people who participated about themes discussed', 'addressed any questions or concerns raised by these young people and ensured that they have the information they need about provision of clothing and luggage', and 'will continue to have discussions with them about their experience to inform the care and support they receive'.
- [REDACTED] advised that the CEO has 'undertaken to survey all of the young people in [REDACTED] care with the same questions used by [the Commission]'.
- [REDACTED] acknowledged that improvements could be made for children and young people and advised that they 'have taken the findings on board' and 'will share them with our Senior Managers and House Managers'.
- [REDACTED] advised that they had 'introduced an operational co-ordinator role (independent to the carer's role) with a focus on talking with our young people on a monthly basis to gain their perspective on matters such as, their likes, dislikes, needs, concerns any complaints they may have and reporting back to Management to ensure we are listening hearing and actioning the same. They are also responsible for facilitating our surveys with young people', which are 'designed to identify the wants, changes, needs of the young people identifying things such as their understanding of the Charter for Young People, clothing needs, outing/community activities, staff compatibility and other issues that they might like to raise with us'.

The department was provided a copy of the full draft report, and the relevant responses have been included in the final report.

## Conclusion

This report provides important insights into the experiences of children and young people living in residential care across the state, and how services support their clothing needs.

The Commission found a concerning gap between policy and operational reality across the divisions and agencies in relation to entitlements to clothing. The lack of clarity and detail in policy caused confusion and there was variation in practice across service providers and a lack of common understanding of entitlements and processes related to clothing and luggage.

The children and young people who met with the Commission were open and thoughtful about their experiences. Although some children and young people the Commission met with were reasonably satisfied with their clothing, many spoke about not having clothing that fitted them or clothes for different weather, recreational activities and social occasions. Children and young people also told the Commission that they want clothing that recognised or celebrated their culture from their care provider.

The Commission has identified a number of opportunities for improvement to improve children and young people's access to clothing across the residential care system as a result of this monitoring activity. The Commission trusts that the department will consider the findings of this report and act on the identified opportunities to improve services provided to children and young people living in residential care.



## Attachment 1: Methodology

On 19 September 2022, the Commission advised the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (the Department) that the next series of the Commission's residential care on-site monitoring activity would commence in October 2022. On 4 October 2022, the Commission advised residential care service providers that the next monitoring series for residential care had commenced.

The randomly selected residential care service providers received written notice one week prior to the activity, along with information sheets to be distributed to both staff and children and young people. Prior to each visit, the Commission met with staff from each service provider to make arrangements for visits to learn about the children and young people residing at the location.

After the visit, any urgent issues were immediately shared with the service provider, and a debrief meeting was held with the service provider, departmental divisional representatives and the Quality and Compliance team.

### **Working with the Commission's Youth Council**

A key feature of the Commission's residential care monitoring activity is the involvement of the Commission's Youth Council to enhance engagement with children and young people. Commission staff consulted frequently with members of the Commission's Youth Council on the activity's methodology, the wording of interview questions and preparation of 'child-friendly' information sheets containing details about the monitoring program.

### **Engagement with children and young people**

Prior to each visit, children and young people were provided with information sheets about the monitoring activity, including photographs and brief summaries of staff who would be attending the home. Each child was provided with a \$30 retail voucher in appreciation for their time and contribution.

Each child and young person consented verbally to participate in the interviews, and Commission staff advised them that they could stop the interview at any time or elect not to answer a question. The Commission asked each child and young person a semi-structured series of questions modifying language to suit a child or young person's needs as required.

On several occasions during the monitoring activity, children and young people raised a specific request or issue. With their consent, the Commission informed the relevant service providers of the request, and on each occasion, the service provider said that the matter would be attended to.

Each participant was asked if they would like to have a copy of their answers provided to them electronically. Two young people requested and were provided with their notes. Each participant was asked if they would like to be involved in future Commission consultations and nine participants agreed to do so.

At the conclusion of the interviews, each child and young person was asked if there was anything about the interview or the questions that could be improved, and in general the feedback was positive.

A summarised version of this report, with youth-friendly messaging, is prepared in consultation with the Commission's Youth Council and provided to each participant.

### **Continuous improvement**

The Commission sent a feedback survey to relevant departmental contacts and service providers after the visits. Positive feedback was received from service providers on the Commission's communication with the organisations, and engagement with children and young people.

The results of each survey received are considered as part of the continuous improvement of the Commission's state-wide residential care monitoring program.

