

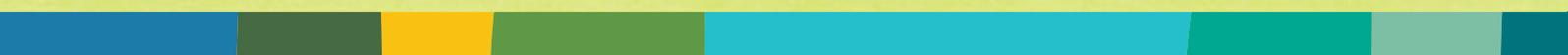
Statement
of Commitment
to Foster and
Family Carers



Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians of Western Australia

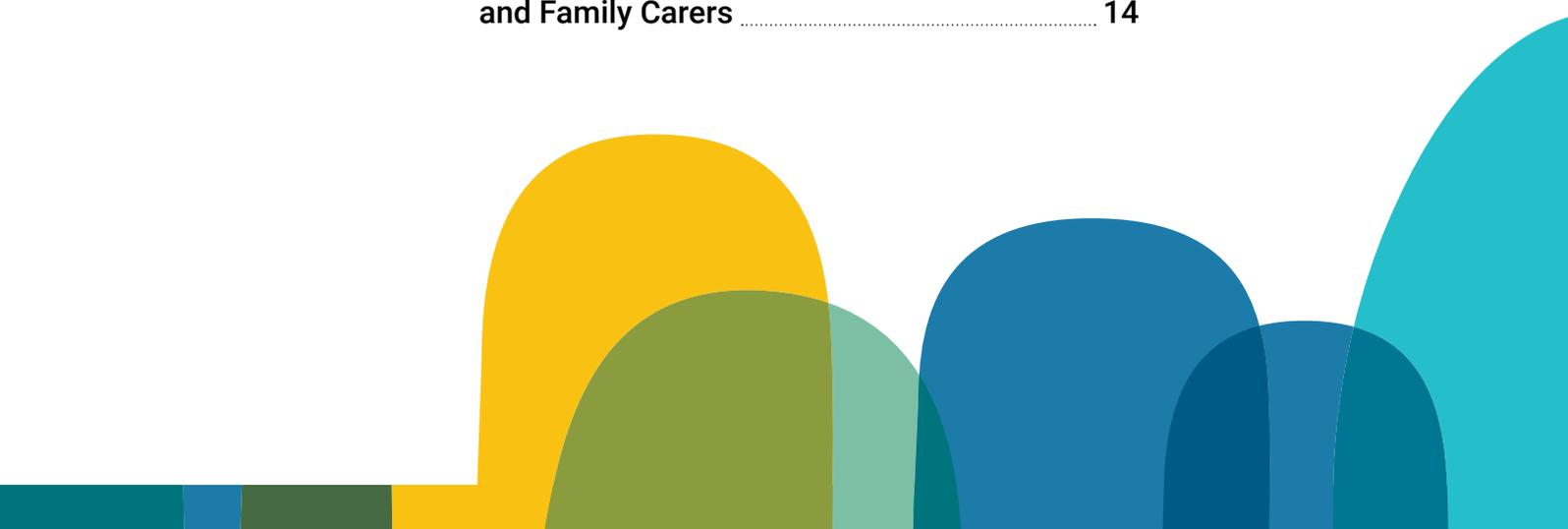
The Department of Communities and key partners proudly acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of this Country and recognises their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities.

We pay our respects to Aboriginal cultures, and to Elders past and present. We acknowledge the ongoing trauma and impact experienced by Aboriginal peoples resulting from past government policies and practices, and commit to working in genuine partnership with Aboriginal peoples to improve outcomes for their children, families, and communities.



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Language

Within Western Australia, the term **Aboriginal** is used in reference to **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander** people, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original custodians of Western Australia. The use of the word 'Aboriginal' within this document refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In the State of Western Australia, the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* defines a **Carer** as a person who provides care for a child under a placement arrangement and who is registered with the Department of Communities (Communities) or a Community Services Sector organisation in accordance with requirements of the Children and Community Services Regulations 2006². For the purpose of the Statement of Commitment, the term Carer is used in reference to Foster and Family Carers³.

The **Community Services Sector** is the collective name for **Community Sector Organisations (CSOs) and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)** in the out-of-home-care system.

The *Children and Community Services Act 2004* defines a **child** as “a person who is under 18 years of age, and in the absence of positive evidence as to age, means a person who is apparently under the age of 18 years of age.”

This Statement of Commitment will use the following definition of **Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CaLD)**⁴: People who were born in countries other than those categorised by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as mainly English speaking – Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, Scotland, South Africa, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Wales.



1. Introduction

The Statement of Commitment to Foster and Family Carers applies to Foster and Family Carers, Communities staff and agencies working with children in out-of-home-care across Western Australia.

It outlines the guiding principles, roles and responsibilities to support effective partnerships with carers, across the broader sector services, Communities, and other key stakeholders.

Communities, Foster Care Association of Western Australia and the Child and Family Alliance have collaborated to develop the Statement of Commitment to foster and family carers. It recognises that we must work in partnership and our commitment to building and maintaining relationships is based on mutual trust and respect.

Communities and non-government partners are committed to providing children with a responsive care system as well as providing carers with the support they need. Carers are an essential part of the care system that is guided by principles as set out in Part 2 of the Children and Community Services Act 2004 as well as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle and the Guidelines for the placement of children from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) background.

2. Acknowledging Foster and Family Carers

Carers have a fundamental role in the development of children in care who have often lived through a range of complex issues and traumatic childhood experiences.

Carers play an essential role in helping children heal from trauma, abuse and neglect, and providing them the care they need to grow, develop, and achieve positive life outcomes. Their role should be valued and not underestimated.

Carers are an essential and respected part of the care team for children in care. By working closely with carers, we can ensure that children in care have opportunities to achieve their full potential. All children in care, including children from Aboriginal and CaLD backgrounds should maintain strong connections to their country, family, culture, and traditions to achieve their full potential.

Communities and non-government partners acknowledge, recognise, and value carers and support them in their role to achieve the best outcomes for children in their care within those principles. Fundamental to supporting carers is the development of a trusting relationship by communicating clearly, listening to their experiences, and responding to any issues and concerns raised.

3. Community Engagement

The experiences and perspectives of carers, families, children, young people, Communities and non-government partners have provided a crucial layer to understanding how respectful and effective partnerships can be achieved with carers.

Consultation sessions were conducted by Communities and co-facilitated with the Foster Care Association and Child and Family Alliance of WA. These sessions included capturing the voices of:

- Communities staff
- children and young people
- foster and family carers across all regions of Western Australia
- Out-of-home-care Community Services Sector, ACCOs and CSOs
- Foster Care Association of Western Australia, foster carers
- Noongar Family Safety and Wellbeing Council
- Foster Families of South West
- Family Inclusion Network of WA
- Australian Childhood Foundation
- Langford Aboriginal Association
- CREATE Foundation.

The following resources assisted in the development of the Statement of Commitment:

- Better Care, Better Services – Standards for Children and Young People in Protection and Care
- Casework Practice Manual. Chapter 3 - Children and Young People in the CEO's Care
- Care Team Approach Practice Framework (2016)
- Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care
- Children and Community Services Act 2004
- Children and Community Services Regulations 2006
- Closing the Gap Report (2020)
- Foster Care Handbook (2021)
- Foster Families Charter of Rights in WA (2004)
- Protocols for the Foster Carer Directory of Western Australia
- Stability and Connection Planning Policy (2021)
- The Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy, Western Australia Government 2021-2029.

4. Guiding Principles

Under the Statement of Commitment, carers can expect to be:

Carers to be	Actions to support this way of working	How do we know it's working
Valued	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carers will be recognised and empowered to use their skills, expertise, and knowledge to carry out their role. • Carers will develop meaningful and respectful relationships. • Carers will be recognised as a vital part of the child's care team. • Carers will be recognised and celebrated for the contributions that they make. • Carers will be valued for their ability to keep a child strong in their identity through connection to family, country, language and culture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carers say that they feel listened to and valued. • Carers receive timely services and support. • Carers feel that Communities and non-government partners are supportive and responsive. • Carers are provided the opportunity to participate in events or training that supports their understanding of the importance to keep a child connected to their family, country, language and culture.
Respected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carers will be respected as individuals beyond their caring role. • Carers will be provided a culturally responsive approach when working as part of the care team. • Carers will be provided a trauma-informed approach when working as part of the care team. • Carers will be recognised for the significant relationship that they have with the children in their care. • Carers questions, requests, and complaints will be responded to in a timely way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carers feel that Communities and non-government partners are supportive and responsive. • Carers feel their culture, family, beliefs, traditions, and origins are valued and recognised. • Carers feel they have appropriate avenues to raise issues, queries and complaints which are responded to in a timely manner.

Carers to be	Actions to support this way of working	How do we know it's working
Informed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role, responsibilities, and entitlements for carers will be clearly communicated to them. • Carers will be provided transparency about their responsibilities and informed about grievance processes. • Carers will be provided with processes to raise concerns and ask for decisions to be reviewed. • Carers will have information about children in their care to support them to meet their individual needs and help them heal. • Carers will be provided information about the child's cultural background to ensure the carer is supported to keep the child connected to family, kinship, community, culture and Country. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities and non-government partners are strengthening information sharing and communication mechanisms which support carers to meet the individual needs of children. • Complaints and compliments processes in place across all out-of-home care services, support agencies and Communities. • Carers and agencies have access to the child's nine dimensions of wellbeing to best support their care needs, the child's Cultural Support Plan and genograms.
Supported	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carers will be provided practical support, guidance, and learning opportunities to meet the needs of the children in their care. • Carers will be provided with the allowances, subsidies and reimbursements permitted to support the individual needs of the children in their care, including those which support the child's connection to family, spirituality, Country, and culture. • Carers will be provided effective processes to resolve disagreements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carers are provided the opportunity to attend the necessary practical support, guidance, and learning opportunities to meet the individual needs of the children in their care. • Carers are provided the allowances, subsidies and reimbursements permitted in a timely manner.
Consulted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carers will be involved in decisions that are made in the best interests of children in their care in accordance with the principles in Part 2 of the <i>Children and Community Services Act 2004</i>. • Carers will be engaged in open and honest communication. • Carers will be provided opportunities to give feedback to inform ongoing service and system improvements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carers say they feel part of the care team and have their views considered in decision making for the child. • Carers feel they have opportunity to provide meaningful feedback in a timely manner to promote service and system improvement.

5. A Commitment to Aboriginal Children

Communities is committed to implementing the four Priority Reform areas and 17 socio-economic outcomes and targets that focus on changing the way governments work with Aboriginal people to bridge the health and wellbeing gap between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal Australians⁵.

These will change the way government partners with Aboriginal people, to support empowerment and self-determination for all Aboriginal West Australians. A key area for Communities is Priority Reform 3 - *Transforming government organisations* which ensures that governments, their organisations and institutions are accountable for Closing the Gap and are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people, including through the services they fund.

There is a strong acknowledgment that every child in out-of-home-care has a right to remain connected to their family, culture and community regardless of their age. Aboriginal children are over-represented in the child protection system. There is a need for strong and meaningful collaboration to reduce the number of Aboriginal children entering out-of-home-care, ensuring that Aboriginal children remain with family on Country, and strengthening the connections to family and Country for those Aboriginal children that are residing in out-of-home-care.

It is acknowledged that Aboriginal children and young people are often not starting at the same point as non-Aboriginal children and young people, as evidenced by early childhood development, education milestones and overall health⁶. Research shows that intergenerational trauma is often embedded in the lived experiences of Aboriginal people and families, making them more likely to experience poorer mental health outcomes, education disadvantage, homelessness, socio-economic stress and poor health⁷.

Carers, out-of-home-care Service providers, support agencies and Communities all acknowledge and value that cultural identity, connectedness, knowledge (including cultural healing and support) and safety must be considered first and foremost for Aboriginal children in care.

The focus of cultural support is not limited to the individual but extends more widely to the child's family and community, with community ownership of programs and building of community capacity. It is important that we all collectively work together to provide a culturally secure and culturally safe placement for the child. This might include:

- Reconnection with family, culture and Country.
- Connection with significant relationships within community.
- Access to wellbeing services.
- Increasing knowledge of own history, culture and Country.
- Participation and engagement in cultural activities.
- Trauma informed therapeutic cultural healing.



Aboriginal frameworks for social and emotional wellbeing⁸

The Commonwealth of Australia have adopted a National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal peoples Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing which contains nine principles that describe the view of whole-of-life health held by Aboriginal people⁹. This framework depicts wellbeing as a series of interdependent relationships between body and mind, family, kinship, community, culture, land, Country, spirituality, and ancestors.

The relational construct of community distinguishes Aboriginal peoples from other traditional Australians. The effective functioning and harmony within the community plays a critical role in Aboriginal people's wellbeing. Belonging to an extended kinship group along with a connection to Country is central to Aboriginal identity and spirituality¹⁰⁻¹².



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle

Communities is required to adhere to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle as set out in Section 12 of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*. This ensures that the child's best interests are paramount when placement decisions are made and that all efforts are exhausted to prioritise the following:

- a. placement with a member of the child's family
- b. placement with an Aboriginal person in the child's community in accordance with local customary practice
- c. placement with an Aboriginal person who lives in close proximity to the child's community
- d. placement with either an Aboriginal person OR with a non-Aboriginal person who –
 - i. lives in close proximity to the child's community; and
 - ii. is responsive to the cultural support needs of the child and is willing and able to encourage and support the child to develop and maintain a connection with the culture and traditions of the child's family or community
- e. placement with a non-Aboriginal person who is responsive to the cultural support needs of the child and is willing and able to encourage and support the child to develop and maintain a connection with the culture and traditions of the child's family or community.



Stability and Connection Planning Policy

The kinship system is a feature of Aboriginal social organisation and family relationships across Australia. It is a complex system that determines how people relate to each other and their roles, responsibilities and obligations in relation to one another, ceremonial business and land.

Aboriginal kinship and family structures are still cohesive forces which bind Aboriginal people together in all parts of Australia. For Aboriginal people their family provides psychological and emotional support which is important to their wellbeing.

To limit the associated trauma when separated from family for safety reasons, there is a continued focus for Aboriginal children to remain connected to their family, parents, and Country.

Stability and connection planning must occur for each child entering out-of-home care. The planning for reunification with family, either parents or extended family, is the primary goal and long-term out-of-home care is the secondary plan. This policy stipulates that the primary and secondary planning must occur in parallel so that if it is assessed that reunification is no longer in a child's best interests, then transition to a stable, long-term out-of-home-care arrangement can occur in a timely manner.



Cultural Support Planning and Family Engagement

A child requires cultural safety¹³ to develop a strong cultural identity, connections and to thrive in their care environment. A strong connection to culture is critical to enable Aboriginal children to know their own personal and cultural history, to experience healing and to improve their own mental health and wellbeing. Cultural connection builds resilience, which is essential for a child to thrive in their environment, particularly if away from family and Country or experiencing unstable care arrangements.

Children residing in out-of-home-care may lose their own home, belongings and their relationships with their parents, siblings and other family members may become strained and more distant when missing out on contact. It is imperative that any cultural items or personal possessions (e.g., photos, letters, or totems) that are important to the child accompany them along with their Cultural Support Plan as they change care arrangements and when they leave the care of the CEO, and that these items are actively promoted within their care arrangement to strengthen cultural safety.

It is also important that regular communication takes place with Communities' senior Aboriginal staff and the child's family, if considered appropriate, to determine a list of common words in the child's Aboriginal language. Other practical strategies to support a child to develop or maintain cultural connections could include liaising with Communities' district staff and relevant care team members, including family of the child, in respect to organising enrolment to an Aboriginal school, developing a schedule for regular return to Country trips or engaging the child in regular cultural events and activities in the community, including with their family wherever possible.



Placement of Siblings

The *Children and Community Services Act 2004* prioritises the placement of siblings in the same care arrangement unless it is not in the children's best interests or possible to do so. When children are unable to be placed with their siblings, appropriate planning must occur to ensure connections between siblings are maintained and that frequent contact occurs wherever possible. This could mean considering placing siblings in the same geographical area and attending the same school when they are unable to reside in the same care arrangement.

6. Roles and Responsibilities



Children and Young People will be supported to:

- Experience stability and consistency during their time in care.
- Participate in planning and decision-making that impacts on their lives and future.
- Access an Advocate for Children to listen to their views, give information and advice, provide support, and speak on their behalf if required.
- Maintain connections to their family, community, culture, and Country.
- Have their needs met through individualised assessment and child focused practices, encompassing all aspects of the child's life and wellbeing.
- Develop their identity and a sense of belonging through their family, friends, culture, spirituality and communities.
- Have provision of timely and high-quality support, as they transition out of care and into adulthood.
- Understand their rights, raise their concerns, and have these responded to and resolved in a timely manner.
- Have provision of high quality and safe care by well trained and supported staff and carers.
- Have comprehensive assessments when child protection concerns are raised and, if required, action is taken to safeguard or promote the child's wellbeing.

Foster & Family Carers Roles and Responsibilities

- Provide a safe and nurturing care environment when protecting the children from harm.
- Advocate for and promote the child's health and wellbeing.
- Maintain the child's connection to their culture, ethnic or religious identity.
- Promoting the child's relationships with their family and significant others.
- Support the child to develop independent life skills and transition to adult life¹⁴.
- Develop meaningful relationships with children in their care, other members of the child's care team and their family wherever possible.
- Participate in ongoing learning and skill development to strengthen their capacity to provide safe, nurturing, and competent care.

Communities Roles and Responsibilities

- Act in the best interests of children in care to ensure their safety, wellbeing and development in accordance with the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*.
- Assess carers in a consistent and timely way.
- Actively include carers in decision making and provide timely communication around outcomes.
- Provide carers with ongoing support, development and training to respond to children's needs in a safe and therapeutic way.
- Provide timely remuneration permitted to carers.
- Involve all key stakeholders in the child's care team, including the child where appropriate. Support carers to maintain the child's connection to culture, community, Country, ethnic or religious identity.

Out-of-home-care Funded Services Roles and Responsibilities	Foster Care Association of WA Roles and Responsibilities	Child and Family Alliance WA Roles and Responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Act in the best interests of children to ensure their safety, wellbeing, and development. • Assess carers in a consistent and timely way and actively include carers in decision-making. • Provide carers with ongoing support, development, and training to respond to children's needs in a safe and therapeutic way. • Provide timely remuneration permitted to carers. • Support carers to maintain the child's connection to their culture, community, Country, ethnic or religious identity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide ongoing professional support and advocacy to carers. • Provide relevant, culturally responsive support to carers. • Provide networking and learning opportunities for carers. • Grow, strengthen, and maintain relationships with foster families and key stakeholders. • Provide opportunities for carers to give feedback to inform ongoing service and system improvements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocate for early intervention and support services for families in need. • Promote the wellbeing of children, young people and families experiencing vulnerability through a range of services. • Provide support, networking, and training for out of home care, early intervention and leaving care service providers.



Shared Roles and Responsibilities

- Always placing the best interests of children at the centre of partnerships and the commitment to work together.
- Understanding and responding to the needs of carers and placing them as part of the child's care team.
- Promoting the importance of children's connection to culture, ethnic or religious identity and relationships with family and significant others.
- Promoting the child's safety, health and wellbeing.
- Providing learning opportunities and support to carers.
- Promote public awareness of fostering in Western Australia.
- Provide opportunities for carers to give feedback to inform ongoing service and system improvements.
- Organisations are child-focused and accountable.

7. Ways to Support Foster and Family Carers

Recognising that providing children with a responsive care system and carers with the support they need is a significant priority for Communities.

There is a strong commitment between Communities, the Foster Care Association of Western Australia, the Australian Childhood Foundation and the broader sector to ensure there are immediate supports in place for an agile care system.

Communities has committed to the continued funding via the Foster Care Association of WA to 30 June 2023 to ensure the provision of information sharing, emotional support, advocacy and assisting linkages to specialist support services for carers across the State.

Communities has committed to the continued funding via the Australian Childhood Foundation - OurSPACE model of specialist therapeutic support to 30 June 2023. This ensures the provision of specialist therapeutic consultation and counselling for carers using a trauma-informed approach which focuses on addressing carer stressors that may lead to placement breakdown and strengthens carers connection and function within the child's care team. As part of the service, OurSPACE service includes a senior Aboriginal counsellor who can provide culturally safe support for Aboriginal carers.

As part of the Foster Care Refresh Project recommendations, plans are underway to trial and expand the Cultural Space model in additional regional and metropolitan districts to inform the development of ongoing place-based cultural supports. This will enhance and strengthen cultural knowledge and cultural understanding for non-Indigenous carers, provide them with practical cultural tools and resources, and help support Aboriginal children to be connected to their family and culture.

Communities has committed to the Family Carer Support Services from 1 July to 30 June 2023 as part of the Out-Of-Home-Care Reform project. This supports family carers to maintain family care arrangements by providing flexible and practical in-home support and prioritises Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home-care.

Communities has appointed a Director of Fostering and Family Care as part of a recommendation from the Foster Care Refresh Project and a working group has commenced to progress further actions within the new Fostering and Family Care Services Directorate. The plan focuses on improving the provision of support to carers, strengthening the cross-sector capacity, developing new specialist programs and redesigning carer assessment processes and practice standards.

Endnotes

1. *The Children and Community Services Act 2004* provides for the protection and care of children in certain circumstances, the provision of social services, financial and other assistance, and other matters concerning the wellbeing of children, other individuals, families, and communities in Western Australia.
2. Under regulation 4 of the *Children and Community Services Regulations 2006* the CEO may approve a carer in accordance with section 79(2)(a)(i) of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* if the CEO is satisfied that the following requirements are able to be met by the carer:
 - is able to provide care for a child in a way that promotes the wellbeing of the child, promotes the child's family and interpersonal relationships, and protects the child from harm
 - is able to provide care for a child in a way that supports the child's culture and identity
 - is able to provide a safe living environment for a child
 - is able to work cooperatively with officers, a child's family and other people when providing care for a child
 - is able to take responsibility for the development of his or her competency and skills as a carer
 - is a person of good character and repute
 - a negative notice or an interim negative notice has not been issued to the individual under the *Working with Children (Criminal Record Checking) Act 2004*.
3. Section 3.1.4, 'Family or Significant Other Care' of Communities, Casework Practice Manual (CPM) provides reference as to how a family carer can be defined. Section 3 of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* defines a 'relative' and a 'significant other' is not defined in this Act but provides reference to adults who would be included in a child's ecomap, have known and demonstrated an active interest in the child and/or their family for a significant period, and belong to the same cultural group.
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13. Section 3.4.3, 'Cultural Support Planning' of Communities, CPM defines cultural safety as creating a space where a person can feel spiritually, emotionally, and physically safe, and able to practice and explore their culture without challenge, denial, or assault.
14. *Better Care, Better Services*, Standard 6 outlines that leaving care plans will include, but are not limited to, exploring a young person's:
 - a. accommodation or supported living arrangements
 - b. independent living skills
 - c. ongoing health needs
 - d. education, training or employment
 - e. mentoring and support through transition, including referral to other organisations or services
 - f. obtaining their driver's licence
 - g. ongoing support for their mental health, and recovery of trauma
 - h. navigating family contact and changes in relationships
 - i. transition between care arrangements or accommodation
 - j. social and emotional supports
 - k. income security and managing money, including any financial supports and benefits accessible through Centrelink
 - l. identification requirements, such as proof of age card or passport
 - m. access to case files and important documents
 - n. compensation, native title, and/or entitlements whilst in care and up to the age of 25.



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