

Child Protection in South Australia

From the Report on Government Services 2025

February 2025



Guardian
for Children and
Young People

Paying Respect & Acknowledgement

The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People humbly and respectfully acknowledge the lands, waters, skies, histories, legacies, talents, creations, sciences, care, love, kindness, giving and generosity of the First Peoples of the lands that we live, work, walk and play upon.

Our office is based on the lands of the Kaurna people, we thank and express our gratitude to Kaurna for looking after this place so future generations can enjoy. We work right across the state called South Australia and we pay similar homage to those nations in which we visit.

Our promise is to work and walk with care in all we do - with our dedication to also supporting future generations.

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Preliminary notes

About The Guardian

The Guardian is an independent statutory officer, appointed to promote and advocate for the rights and best interests of children and young people in care. This includes advocacy on an individual and systemic basis, as well as monitoring their safety and wellbeing.

The Guardian is also appointed as Child and Young Person's Visitor, Training Centre Visitor and Youth Treatment Orders Visitor. More information about each of these roles is available on the Guardian's website at www.gcyp.sa.gov.au.

Data sources

Data published in this reporting is primarily sourced from the Report on Government Services 2025 (ROGS 2025).

Where additional context is informative or required, information from other data sources may also be used. This includes information published by the South Australian government in other sources, provided directly to the OGCYP by the Department for Child Protection, and Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW) data for the 2022-23 financial year (noting that, at the date of this report, the AIHW has not yet published child protection data for 2023-24).

Data rounding

Please note that some data may not add up due to decimal rounding.

Data accuracy and comparability

The Productivity Commission urges caution when interpreting data published in the ROGS 2025, due to variance in the completeness, direct comparability and quality of reported data.

Generally, data is comparable within a particular jurisdiction over time, subject to caveats in the relevant data table. Standardised counting rules set out in the National Child Protection Minimum Data Set Data Collection Manual aim to provide consistency across jurisdictions, to the greatest extent possible. However, data comparability

across jurisdictions may be impacted by differences in legislative, policy and practice frameworks. Cross-jurisdictional comparative data should be interpreted with due caution, and with reference to the detailed footnotes in the applicable ROGS 2025 tables.

Data in the ROGS 2025 is the most accurate available at the time of data collection, and historical data may have been updated since previous Productivity Commission reports. While caution has been taken to ensure that all data in this report is accurate at the time of publication, it is acknowledged that there may be unintentional errors or discrepancies. Readers should refer to the ROGS 2025 directly as the most authoritative source of data for the relevant child protection program indicators detailed in this report.

Time series financial data in the ROGS 2025 are adjusted to 2023-24 dollars.

Please note that some data may not add up due to decimal rounding.

Introduction

Since 2017, my office has published an annual monitoring report that analyses data from the Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services (ROGS), related to care services and child protection services expenditure.

I undertake this monitoring, through my statutory functions as the Guardian for Children and Young People, Training Centre Visitor, Child and Young Person's Visitor and Youth Treatment Orders Visitor. In these roles, I am appointed to advocate for and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in care and youth detention in South Australia.

In monitoring the circumstances of children and young people in care, I take a significant interest in South Australia's reporting against national child protection indicators, relating to out-of-home care (OOHC) and broader service delivery and expenditure.

This publication forms just one piece of my monitoring and oversight functions, so I can provide my observations about how these indicators should be interpreted. This includes whether our systems are set up for success and giving children and young people in South Australia the best opportunities to grow well in families and places that care for and about them.

My observations are aligned with advice and findings put forward by state, national and international expert bodies, the sector, community members and children and young people – who have all been telling government for a long time that it needs to direct adequate resourcing towards child protection and care

services, spent where the evidence shows it matters.

This is essential to protect children and young people's right to grow up with their families, wherever this is possible and in their best interests. And, to ensure they receive the special assistance and support they need for recovery when they have experienced trauma or disadvantage within their families, and/or it is not safe to stay with them.

I highlight, in particular, guidance from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). That body has consistently raised concerns about widespread under-resourcing across Australian child protection systems as a core human rights issue. It has expressed serious concern about the 'persistently high' number of children and young people in care, and that Australian child protection systems do not have the required resources to provide adequate care and services to support children in care. To address these matters, the UNCRC has urged Australia to:

- **Invest** in family preservation services and strategies – particularly those developed and implemented by **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and communities**.
- **Limit** child removal to when it is genuinely necessary, and for the shortest time possible.
- **Ensure** adequate human, technical and financial resources to child protection services.¹

This guidance sets a clear challenge for all Australian jurisdictions: to get better at directing resources towards keeping children out of state care whenever possible, and to

¹ UNCRC, *Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Australia*, 1 November 2019, CRC/C/AUS/CO/5-6, para [33] – [34].

invest more in the wellbeing, recovery and day-to-day care of vulnerable children and young people who have been separated from their families.

The child protection indicators analysed in this publication are based on monitoring government progress to achieve those outcomes identified by the UNCRC in South Australia, through:

1. Reducing the rate and number of children and young people in care
2. Prioritising family-based placements

3. Improving quality of care
4. Achieving equity for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and young people
5. Increasing government spending where it matters.

These are areas where South Australia's legislative and funding settings are not prioritising the lives, wellbeing and best interests of children and young people – so this is where we must direct our scrutiny and strive for improvement.

Summary of progress

Before outlining my own observations in interpreting ROGS 2025 data, I acknowledge that the South Australian government has identified three key improvements in its media release, [South Australia leads the way in finding stable homes for young people](#):

- Slowing the growth of children coming into OOHC.
- Investigating more notifications.
- Providing greater stability for children and young people in OOHC.

The release stated that these positive indicators are reflective of significant investment into services and programs in recent years, and 'that work to transform the child protection and family support system is beginning to show results.'

I refer to this commentary from government, because I believe there is more to the story around these indicators put forward as signs of success. In my own reporting, I seek to support a more fulsome examination of those indicators, and what they tell us about the health and maturity of the child protection and family support system in South Australia.

There are indeed significant and ongoing reforms evident in South Australia's child protection and family support system, with the continued aim to improve practice and service delivery for children and young people and their families. I acknowledge the concerted efforts of government, non-

government and community-controlled sector in making headway in this.

I have also observed other figures published in the ROGS 2025 that show early signs of progress in 2023-24. This includes:

- A slightly higher proportion of children and young people in OOHC at 30 June 2024 who were living with 'relatives and kin' – 51.2%, compared to 50.4% at 30 June 2023.²
- A small decrease (6 individuals) in the number of Aboriginal children and young people living in residential care, from 290 at 30 June 2023 to 284 at 30 June 2024 (2.1% decrease, compared to 9.8% increase the previous financial year).³
- A significant increase in reported figures for combined family support and intensive family support services compared to 2022-23.⁴
- An increase in annual expenditure per child or young person in OOHC at 30 June from \$142,182 in 2022-2023 to \$151,377 in 2023-24 (6.5%) – an essential investment in their lives.⁵

Progress in these areas is a positive sign. But let's be clear, it is not the same as a system transformation. In fact, for the most part, indicators for 2023-24 tell a similar story to recent years:

- There was an **overall increase in the care population** from 4,882 at 30 June 2023 to 4,915 at 30 June 2024. While

² Data source: ROGS 2025, Table 16A.22. I discuss the definition of relative/kin used in ROGS reporting at [Measure 2: Prioritising Family-Based Environments](#) and [Measure 4: Equity for Aboriginal children and young people](#), including aspects that are problematic.

³ Data source: ROGS 2025, Table 16A.21.

⁴ Data source: ROGS 2025, Table 16A.8. The figure for 2023-24 showed a 44.2% increase – however, this must be interpreted with caution, noting that a significant portion of the increase is attributable to the inclusion of existing services not previously captured within this reporting category. This means that data is not strictly comparable to previous years. This is discussed in more detail at [Measure 5: Expenditure](#).

⁵ Data source: ROGS 2025, Table 16A.37.

noting that the rate of growth was lower than in the previous financial year – 0.7% in 2023-24, compared to 2.6% in 2022-23 – it was still growth.⁶

- Both the number and proportion of children and young people in **residential care increased** from 755 at 30 June 2023 to 783 at 30 June 2024. Again, this growth was less than the previous year (3.7%, compared to 6.3% in 2022-23).⁷
- Key indicators for quality of care told a concerning story – with **reduced placement stability** for children and young people exiting care, and NAPLAN results demonstrating that children and young people in care continue to be significantly disadvantaged compared to their peers in educational outcomes.⁸
- While there was a small increase in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people placed with ‘relatives or kin’ – 55.9% at 30 June 2024, compared to 54.9% at 30 June 2023 – this was accompanied by a **slight reduction in the proportion living with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers**, from 38.1% to 38.0% over the same time period.⁹
- The trend of **ongoing growth** in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in ‘**other supported placements**’ continued – increasing by 14.3% from 70 at 30 June 2023 to 80 at 30 June 2024.¹⁰
- The **proportion of expenditure on care services** in 2023-24 remained **significantly imbalanced** compared to other jurisdictions, at 79.7% of child

protection services expenditure compared to 64.9% nationally.¹¹

- Despite this high proportion, **annual expenditure per child in residential care** at 30 June 2024 remained **significantly lower** than other reporting jurisdictions, at \$0.6 million compared to an average of \$1.0 million for other reporting jurisdictions.¹²

Focusing on areas of success is vital to maintaining healthy systems, workforces and communities. It has protective benefits for ensuring investment and efforts are targeted to build on those areas. It has psychological and emotional benefits for everyone with involvement in the child protection and family support system, so that children and young people and their families can feel confident in the help they will receive, and workforces feel valued and respected within their communities.

However, relying on skewed interpretation of datasets to build a narrative of success does not support these outcomes. It does not help efforts to direct resources where they are needed to resolve genuine systemic issues; and it causes hurt to those whose experience of travelling through these systems.

My reporting does not seek to undermine positive efforts within the child protection and family support services portfolio. Quite the opposite, it seeks to apply a realistic lens to measuring success – and it seeks to build a fulsome picture of what works, what needs more attention and where we can do better.

⁶ Data source: ROGS 2025, Table 16A.2 and 16A.3.

⁷ Data source: ROGS 2025, Table 16A.21.

⁸ Discussed in more detail at [Measure 3: Quality of care](#).

⁹ Data source: ROGS 2025, Table 16A.22 and 16A.23.

¹⁰ Data source: ROGS 2025, Table 16A.3. These placements primarily consist of third-party order care arrangements; a matter discussed in more detail at [Exits from OOHC](#).

¹¹ Data source: ROGS 2025, Table 16A.8.

¹² Data source: ROGS 2025, Table 16A.37. Other reporting jurisdictions are Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania.

Measure 1: Reducing the Number of Children and Young People in Care ¹³

Children and young people have a right to grow up with their families, wherever this is possible and in their best interests. If they do come into care, this should be for the shortest time possible. In South Australia, we need to get better at supporting families as an alternative to child removal as well as improving avenues for reunification.

At 30 June 2024, there were 4,915 children and young people in care in South Australia. This was an increase of 33 children and young people compared to 30 June 2023.¹⁴

These figures mark a reduced rate of growth for children and young people in care – 0.7% in 2023-24, compared to 2.6% in 2022-23.

This reduced rate is a promising sign, but it's important to be clear: overall, the number of children and young people in care still grew in South Australia when nationally that number actually fell.

My observations in this area come with an acknowledgment that discussing growth in the care population is a complicated topic. Children and young people have a right to not be separated from their families unless it is genuinely necessary. But there are times where they are unable to grow up with their families, because it is not in their best interests. The OOHC system has an important role in helping children and young people and their families in these circumstances, through finding safe and supportive homes for them to live and grow in.

I think it is important to state here that becoming consumed with statistics and expenditure targets can be dangerous and harmful for the lives of individuals. If it is in the best interests of a child to be removed

from their family and be placed into care, then such targets should never be a factor in that decision. Our sole focus should and must be on the best interests of children and young people.

Applying that approach means that total numbers in care will and do fluctuate, in accordance with family and community need. Both large-scale and local social and economic circumstances may change the level of need in South Australian communities for OOHC services, from time to time. But when there is persistent growth in the number of children and young people in care – particularly where this is against national trends – policy reflection is required.

That reflection must examine whether statutory intervention responses were genuinely required in such a high number of circumstances, or whether more should be done to support children, young people and their families to stay together. It must examine whether the trend is for the betterment of our communities, or a result of poor policy.

When examining South Australian figures, it must be acknowledged that this state has faced serious challenges in recent years, connected with legislative reform between 2016 and 2018 which put the state on a

¹³ Data source for figures in this section are ROGS 2025, Tables 16A.1, 16A.2, 16A.3, 16A.4, 16A.5, 16A.6, 16A.8, 16A.41, and 16A.42; AIHW Child Protection Australia 2022-23, Table T3; AIHW *Child Protection Australia 2021-22*, Table 10.15.

¹⁴ My reporting includes children and young people in 'other supported placements' within the figure of those in care. The reason for doing so is discussed below, at [Exits from OOHC](#). Due to the inclusion of these figures, data in my reporting may differ from figures published in other sources, including due to manual calculation across multiple ROGS 2025 tables.

trajectory of very high growth in the care population.¹⁵

In fact, over the past five financial years (between 30 June 2019 and 30 June 2024), the number grew by 23.2% – compared to 4.6% nationally.

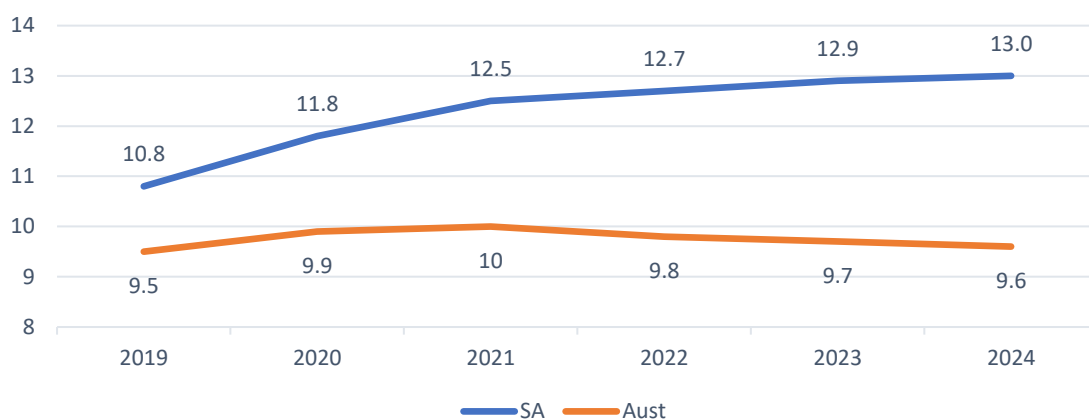
This has furthered the divide between the per capita rate of children and young people in care in South Australia, compared to nationally:

- At 30 June 2019, 9.5 children and young people in Australia were in care, for every 1,000 children and young people in the population – compared to 10.8 in South Australia
- At 30 June 2024, this figure increased nationally by 1.2%, to 9.6. Contrastingly, it increased by 20.2% in South Australia, to 13.0.

This growing divide can be seen below in Chart 1, comparing the per capita rate of children and young people in care in South Australia, and nationally.

Chart 1: Comparison in the rate of children in care at 30 June, per 1,000 children in the population, South Australia and nationally

Data source: ROGS 2025, Table 16A.2, 16A.3 and Table 16A.42



These figures and table show that South Australian systems are struggling to support children and young people within their families. I have advised government that substantial corrective action is required to amend legislative settings

which have contributed to these circumstances; notably, through a disproportionate focus on a narrow conception of safety and promoting permanency of care arrangements above other rights and interests for children and young people.

¹⁵ For more information, see [The Guardian's submission to the Select Committee on the Children and Young People \(Safety and Support\) Bill 2024](#) (2025).

The Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Bill 2024 introduced into Parliament in October 2024 goes some way towards this corrective action, through reintroducing a principle of best interests, and strengthening provisions to promote reunification with families. While acknowledging the positive intent behind the Bill and these provisions, I have provided firm and considered advice that it does not go far enough to steer South Australia's child protection and family support system in the right direction. In particular, I have advised Parliament and the Department for Child Protection (DCP) that the Bill must be reframed around the **best interests of the child as the paramount consideration** in the operation of the legislation, with safety as a critical integrated component.¹⁶

At the date of this report, that Bill is currently before the Legislative Council of South Australia for consideration. I look forward to continuing to provide my advice to both Parliament and the Department for Child Protection, regarding required amendments to the Bill.

Areas to watch

While noting that the reduced rate of growth in the care population in 2023-24 is a positive sign, trends in the indicators underlying this measure require close examination.

This includes the interaction between entries to and exits from OOHC – and monitoring where exits are occurring through transfer to third-party orders.

Entries to OOHC

In 2023-24, 706 children and young people entered OOHC care, a 9.3% reduction from the previous year.

This reduction is a promising sign for South Australia. But the drivers behind this indicator need careful attention – particularly because the outcome is somewhat at odds with other related figures and the broader systemic context.

In 2023-24, there was a slight increase in the number of notifications (0.6%) in South Australia, with a more substantial increase in the proportion of finalised investigations (18.1%) and substantiations of abuse and/or neglect (11.1%). With all things being equal, and in line with the trend in previous years, it may have been expected that the number of children and young people coming into OOHC would rise.

Of course, there are active strategies that governments can implement to help children and young people remain safely within their families, in circumstances where there have been substantiations of abuse or neglect. That means it's not an automatic conclusion that higher substantiations would or should lead to higher numbers of children and young people entering care.

Relevant strategies include intensive support to address abuse or neglect arising from exposure to family violence, or connected with poverty factors such as food or housing insecurity. There has indeed been increased investment in initiatives to better support families in past years, including areas such as family group conferencing, and family safety services.¹⁷ This is a positive step and may be

¹⁶ For more information, see my submissions regarding the [Review of the Children and Young People Safety Act 2017](#), the [Draft Child and Young Person \(Safety and Support\) Bill 2024](#) accompanied by a submission collated on behalf of people with care experiences [From Those Who Know](#), and my submission to the [Select Committee on the Children and Young People \(Safety and Support\) Bill 2024](#).

¹⁷ The 2023-24 State Budget announced relevant initiatives including \$35.7 million over five years to increase targeted intensive family support services; \$13.4 million over five years to increase family group conferencing services; and \$6.1 million over four

expected to reduce the number of children and young people coming into OOHC, over time.

But it is unclear that the level of investment would account for the significant decrease in entries to OOHC, particularly in the absence of a meaningful shift in related legislative and policy settings.

At the same time, it is significant to observe that reported expenditure on protective intervention services (PIS) in South Australia decreased in 2023-24 by 3.9% and per capita PIS expenditure on children and young people in the population in South Australia remains the lowest in the country (at \$206.66 in South Australia, compared to \$343.37 nationally). As this expenditure impacts the child protection and family support system's capacity to assess and respond to child protection reports, this change in expenditure is concerning.

It will be important to monitor this trend in future years, to ensure that any reduction in entries to OOHC is related to better supporting children and young people within their families – *and not attributable to a lack of responsiveness* to child protection concerns or concentrating on lower-level child protection reports for assessment and intervention services to influence indicator outcomes.

Exits from OOHC

There was a substantial increase in exits from OOHC in 2023-24, of 8.9% compared to 2022-23. This amounted to the highest number of exits since 2017-18, at 712 children and young people. This combination of reduced entries to OOHC and increased exits from OOHC may be expected to result in an overall reduction in the care population. Indeed, if focusing solely

on OOHC figures, that number did decrease very slightly in 2023-24 – from 4,534 at 30 June 2023, to 4,528 at 30 June 2024 (0.1% decrease).

However, when including the figure for 'other supported placements', this changes the result. In 2023-24 the number of children and young people in other supported placements in South Australia increased by 11.2%, from 348 at 30 June 2023 to 387 at 30 June 2024. Overall, this led to growth in the *care population* despite the decrease in the *OOHC population*.

I make this distinction in my own reporting, which treats children and young people living in other supported placements as being in care. This is different to the approach of the Productivity Commission in the ROGS, and I explain my reasons below.

Reporting on children in care v children in OOHC: what's the difference?

Since 2018-19, ROGS reporting has removed other supported placements from OOHC figures. I do not agree with this reporting change, and I continue to include children and young people living in other supported placements as being in care. This is particularly important to ensure that those living in third-party order care arrangements are reflected within that status.

The ROGS 2025 does not delineate between the types of care arrangements included in other supported placements. However, based on data from recent years published in other sources, it can be estimated that more than 95% of children and young people in other supported placements in South Australia are those on third-party orders.¹⁸ These orders

years for family support services for at-risk first-time parents: Government of South Australia, *State Budget 2023-24: Budget Overview: Budget Paper 1* (2023), p. 10.

¹⁸ This estimate is drawn from comparing ROGS data in Table 16A.3 with the AIHW's annual report *Child Protection in Australia* for the 2022-23 financial year (Table T3). This report has not yet been released for 2023-24. Other care arrangements included within other supported placements are children and young people on immigration orders (where funding is provided by the Australian

involve transferring the child's guardianship from the Chief Executive of the DCP to a foster, kinship or other family-based carer who has been caring for the child for at least two years.¹⁹

ROGS reporting has excluded these care arrangements from OOHC reporting as part of an increased focus in recent years on permanency planning for children in care.²⁰ Third-party orders, in theory, result in a stable and permanent care arrangement for a child or young person until they reach 18 years. For this reason, government policy treats these care arrangements as an indicator of positive outcomes for children and young people, showing that government has found them a permanent home and they've exited from the statutory care system. This is described in ROGS reporting as exiting care into a 'permanency arrangement'.²¹

This change in reporting is a controversial decision – because it's not clear that transferring guardianship to a third-party under these legislative arrangements is always a good thing. Some children and young people may thrive in these circumstances, but others do not. Overall, there is a scarcity of evidence available about outcomes for those living in third-party order care arrangements, compared to those in care or living with their biological families.²² That means we do not really know how well children and young people are growing up in these circumstances.

For children and young people living in third-party order care arrangements, they may still experience many of the same areas of

vulnerability as those under the custody or guardianship of the Chief Executive of DCP. They have been removed from their families by DCP, and there are still court orders preventing their families caring for them. They may be even more disconnected from family than others in care, because the same rules that apply to DCP around supporting connections and mechanisms for making and challenging contact determinations do not apply to third-party guardians. Despite experiencing these vulnerabilities, my own statutory independent oversight and advocacy functions do not extend to children and young people living in third-party order care arrangements – and nor does any other child-focused statutory body. I advocated for this to change through recommendations to the legislative review of the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017*,²³ however no relevant amendments have been put forward.

Analysing third-party order figures are also an essential part of monitoring the ongoing removal and dislocation from families and culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. SNAICC's Family Matters 2024 Report observed that the true intention of Closing the Gap Target 12 – to reduce statutory intervention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family life – is undermined if 'governments seek to achieve it by permanently removing children from their families and excluding them from the count of children in OOHC'.²⁴

Government and children do not come through the child protection system), and ongoing placements for young people aged 18 years or over.

¹⁹ Under the Children and Young People (Safety Act) 2017, Ch 7, Pt 3.

²⁰ Amy Conley Wright, Judith Cashmore, Sarah Wise and Clare Tilbury, 'Comparative analysis of third-party permanency orders legislation in Australia' (2023) 58(2) *Australia Journal of Social Issues* 259.

²¹ Productivity Commission, ROGS 2025: Community Services (Part F), p. 159.

²² Nancy Rolock, Alfred G Pérez, Kevin R White and Rowena Fong, 'From foster care to adoption and guardianship: a twenty-first century challenge' (2018) 35 *Child Adolescent Social Work Journal* 11; Wright et al (n 20).

²³ See my submission regarding the [Review of the Children and Young People Safety Act 2017](#), p 26-31, and the [Draft Child and Young Person \(Safety and Support\) Bill 2024](#), pp. 15-16.

²⁴ SNAICC – National Voice for our Children, *The Family Matters Report 2024* (2024), p 15.

With these considerations in mind, it is concerning to observe that the number of children and young people living in other supported placements has increased by 89.7% in South Australia over the past five years (between 30 June 2019 and 30 June 2024) – compared to 23.2% growth in the total care population.

These figures indicate a targeted strategy to apply for an increased number of third-party orders in South Australia. Such applications should only ever be made when it is in the child or young person's best interests – not to obscure or artificially lower care population figures for reporting purposes.

Key Takeaways

1. The ROGS 2025 shows fewer kids are in OOHC, but this is because more children are being shifted into third-party guardianship.
2. This doesn't mean these children are better off, just that they're being counted differently.
3. There's no real oversight for these children, and we don't fully understand how well they're doing.
4. It is important that decisions about children being placed under third-party orders are truly focused on what is in the best interests of the child.

Permanency Arrangements

The Government of South Australia's recent [media release](#) observes that South Australia 'leads the nation' with 96.2 per cent of children exiting OOHC in 2022-23 to a permanency arrangement not returning for 12 months.²⁵

I believe that caution is required in relying on this figure as an indicator of success, for the following reasons:

1. South Australia's 'try' v 'success' rate: The rate of 96.2% was above the national rate of 89.8%, and the highest in the country. But this does not mean that there were a high *number* of children and young people exiting care in these circumstances. In fact, only 238 children and young people aged 0 – 16 years exited OOHC to a permanency arrangement in 2022-

23 – with 229 not returning to OOHC within 12 months.

While this is a high *success* rate, it is a low *try* rate. Only approximately 4.6% of the 5,170 children and young people who were in an OOHC placement in South Australia during 2022-23 exited care to a permanency arrangement, with this figure dropping to approximately 4.4% for those who did not return within 12 months.²⁶

This is well below the national rate of approximately 10.0% of children and young people in an OOHC placement in 2022-23 exiting care to a permanency arrangement, with approximately 9.0% not returning to care within 12 months.

²⁵ This figure is for the 2022-23 financial year, to account for data monitoring a return to care within 12 months within the 2023-24 financial year.

²⁶ These figures are an approximation, as this ROGS indicator is based on children and young people aged 0 – 16 years. The inclusion of young people aged 17 years who exited to a permanency arrangement in 2022-23 would be expected to increase the proportion slightly. In the absence of an exact figure, the approximation is illustrative to demonstrate the comparison between South Australia and nationally.

It is also important to highlight the number of children and young people who exited care in 2022-23 – but not to a permanency arrangement.

Overall, 654 children and young people aged 0 – 17 years exited care in 2022-23. This means that, for approximately 400 children and young people, their exit from care was not through reunification or third-party orders.²⁷ Instead, these exits mostly occur from short-term care and protection orders expiring, or children and young people aging out of care on their 18th birthday.

Accordingly, I suggest that the assertion made in the South Australian government's recent media release – that South Australia leads the way in finding stable homes for young people – is a long way off the reality of the situation.

2. Transparency of outcomes: There are three ways that a child or young person exits OOHC to a permanency arrangement: third-party orders, adoptions, or reunification with a child or young person's family. In reporting on exits to a permanency arrangement, the ROGS 2025 does not differentiate between the three – but based on data published in

other sources from previous financial years,²⁸ it can be estimated that approximately 20% of exits to these permanency arrangements relate to third-party orders.²⁹

For the reasons discussed above, it is highly problematic to include third-party order care arrangements as an indicator of success. The focus of this indicator should instead be on efforts to improve reunification rates with children and young people's families.

Key Takeaways

1. While it's true that 96.2% of children who leave care through reunification or third-party orders stay out, there aren't many children in that position.
2. South Australia has one of the lowest rates of children exiting care to permanency arrangements. Only approximately 4.4% successfully left and stayed out for 12 months, compared to the national average of approximately 9.0%.
3. Third-party orders should not be treated as a success. They often mean less oversight and support, and we don't know if they actually improve children's lives.
4. Real success should focus on reunification efforts. The best outcome is safely returning children to their families, which should be the priority.
5. Reports should clearly separate the different types of permanency arrangements to give a more accurate picture of how well the system is actually working.

²⁷ This number is an approximation, noting that a small proportion of the 654 children and young people who exited out-of-home care in 2022-23 may have been 17-year-olds exiting to a permanency arrangement – and accordingly not counted in the figure of 238 children and young people aged 0 – 16 years who exited care to a permanency arrangement.

²⁸ The most recent public reporting on reunification for children and young people in South Australia and nationally is the AIHW's report, *Child Protection Australia 2021-22* (2023). This figure may be higher or lower for the 2023-24 financial year.

²⁹ This figure is estimated through comparing the number of children and young people who exited care to a permanency arrangement as reported in the ROGS 2025 for the financial years between 2019-20 and 2021-22 (ROGS 2025, Table 16A.41), with reporting in the AIHW *Child Protection Australia 2021-22* (Table 10.15) regarding the number of children and young people reunified during those financial years.

Measure 2: Prioritising Family-Based Environments ³⁰

It's uncontroversial to say: families are better at growing up children and young people than government departments or institutional environments. South Australian systems need to prioritise supporting children and young people in OOHC to live in kinship and other family-based care environments.

Since commencing as The Guardian in August 2022, I have reported on serious concerns about the safety and wellbeing of children and young people in residential care – concerns that were also reported upon by my predecessors, and which are echoed across jurisdictions, and United Nations commentary on Australia's OOHC systems.

Residential care can be an important part of a child or young person's journey, and may facilitate positive outcomes such as delivering short-term and intensive therapeutic care services to meet individualised needs, supporting young people who want to transition to independent living options, or keeping siblings together.

While recognising these positive outcomes, residential care is an institutional environment based on rotating shifts of paid workers. As a long-term care arrangement, it is associated with poor outcomes in most circumstances and should be used sparingly, and only when it is genuinely necessary in the best interests of the child or young person. In a healthy and well-functioning OOHC system, it should be expected that only a small proportion of the care population would be living in residential care.

This is not the case in South Australia, which has seen significant growth in the residential care population over the past five financial years (between 30 June 2019 and 30 June 2024) – a 38.1% increase, compared to 23.2% increase in the care population.³¹

In 2023-24, there was again growth in the number of children and young people living in residential care – with an increase of 3.7%, from 755 at 30 June 2023 to 783 at 30 June 2024. This amounted to 17.3% of the OOHC population, and the second highest proportion in Australia (following Queensland, at 19.8%).

As a per capita rate, 1 in 483 children and young people in South Australia were living in residential care at 30 June 2024. This was the highest rate nationally, well above the per capita rate of 1 in 1,227 children and young people in Australia.

While it is positive to observe that the rate of growth was not as high as in previous financial years, this should not be described as an indicator of success. Both the number and proportion of children and young people in residential care in South Australia increased in 2023-24. The reasons for this growth are nuanced, but as an overall trend it is symptomatic of a system under immense pressure due to the numbers of children and young people coming into care and placement stability for children in family based care environments over recent years.

An important clarification is required: to say that the system is under pressure does not mean that there are insufficient family-based care arrangements available. While there are limitations to the number of households that are in a position and/or willing to provide foster care placements, mapping and exploring supported kinship care

³⁰ Data source for figures in this section are ROGS 2025, Tables 16A.2, 16A.21, 16A.22 and 16A.42.

³¹ The ROGS 2025 defines 'residential care' as placements in a residential building, established for the purpose of providing placements for children and young people, where there are paid staff. From 2018-19, new national counting rules for residential care were introduced, so the term is now inclusive of independent living placements.

arrangements offers great potential for children and young people in care to grow up in family-based environments.

This is reflected in figures regarding the proportion of children and young people living with relatives or kin at 30 June, compared to those living in foster care. While relative/kin placements increased (from 50.4% in 2022-23 to 51.2% in 2023-24), there was a reduction in both the number and proportion living in foster care (from 32.0% at 30 June 2023 to 30.4% at 30 June 2024).

In response to these pressures, the figures indicate a need to strategically focus on prioritising kinship care as the primary policy direction for family-based care, to

- support children and young people to either transition from residential care or,
- ideally, not be placed in these care arrangements in the first place unless genuinely necessary and in their best interests.

Finding and supporting these care arrangements requires adequate resourcing towards family scoping, kinship carer

assessments and approving costs for therapeutic supports for children and young people with disability or trauma-related needs. It also requires a focus on how kinship carers are treated, including through culturally safe practices.³²

A system that is under pressure to respond to higher numbers of children and young people in care, without commensurate resourcing, is not in a position to respond and progress those necessary reforms – which are essential to enable growth in the proportion of care arrangements provided by family members.

As discussed in the preceding section, the pressure upon the child protection and family support system can be alleviated through strategic legislative and policy reform. It is also deeply tied to expenditure, both towards services for children and young people in care such as kinship carer assessments and therapeutic supports and directing resources towards family and intensive family supports. This is discussed further at [Measure 5: Expenditure](#).

Key Takeaways

1. Residential care should only be used when absolutely necessary, but in South Australia, its use continues to grow.
2. South Australia has the highest rate of kids in residential care per capita in Australia. Instead of reducing numbers, the system keeps expanding its reliance on these placements.
3. Kinship care (placing children with relatives) is increasing, while foster care is declining. The government should prioritise kinship care as the main alternative to residential care.
4. The system is under pressure, but the real problem isn't just a lack of foster homes—it's a lack of investment in family-based care.
5. For real change, investment in kinship care support, family assessments, and therapeutic services to help children stay with relatives is needed.

³² As discussed in this report at [Measure 4: Equity for Aboriginal children and young people](#), it is concerning that the overall increase in children and young people in relative/kin care is not extending to placements for children and young people with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander relatives and kin.

Measure 3: Quality of Care³³

The best early intervention and prevention is investing in the lives and quality of care for children and young people in care – to help them grow well, safe and supported. The sectoral focus on investing and improving practice in other child protection areas in South Australia is highly important. But it should not detract from striving to improve the quality of care services in South Australia.

When children and young people are removed from their families and enter care, the government takes on significant responsibility for making decisions that support their best interests and wellbeing (including safety).

The Chief Executive of the DCP, as their legal guardian, has a legislative responsibility for their day-to-day care. The whole of government has an ethical responsibility to support children and young people in care with the extra support that they need to heal, recover and grow.

It is unfortunate to observe that ROGS reporting contains relatively few substantive indicators of quality of care, to provide transparency and accountability about how well or poorly government is meeting these obligations. Where indicators are included:

- They often exclude children and young people in other supported placements, undermining transparency for these care arrangements
- The focus is on quantitative rather than qualitative measures, such as completion of documented case plans, rather than the substantive outcomes of case planning
- Some are based on government policy positions rather than a firm evidence-base, such as exiting care to a 'permanency arrangement' (as discussed earlier in this report).

My position is that national and state-level public reporting requires a much greater focus on measuring outcomes for children and young people in care.

I understand that this approach may be reflected in monitoring and evaluation under *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protection Australia's Children 2021-2031*. There have, however, been significant delays in the finalisation of the monitoring and evaluation strategy for the framework; while it was initially intended to be published before the end of 2023, publicly available information indicates the strategy remains under development at the date of this report.³⁴ It is anticipated that monitoring and evaluation under the *Safe and Supported Outcomes Framework* is likely to pose significant challenges for all governments, including South Australia, due to gaps in information and technology infrastructure.

While planning for this monitoring and evaluation framework is underway, ROGS data remains a key source of information regarding quality of care. As such, my reporting includes monitoring the following ROGS indicators:

- Substantiations of abuse for children and young people in care
- Placement stability for children and young people exiting care during the financial year
- NAPLAN results for children and young people in care.

³³ Data source for figures in this section are ROGS 2025, Tables 16A.1, 16A.2, 16A.14, 16A.16, 16A.18, 16A.24, 16A.40; ROGS 2024, Table 16A.16; AIHW *Child Protection Australia 2022-23*, Table S4.10.

³⁴ [Safe and Supported reporting | Department of Social Services](#), accessed February 2025, last updated 20 Nov 2024.

In 2023-24, outcomes regarding each of the above quality of care indicators were concerning.

Substantiations of abuse

In 2023-24, 4.2% of children and young people who were in care during the year were subject to a substantiation of abuse or neglect.³⁵ This was an increase of 1.2 percentage points, from 3.1% of children and young people in 2022-23.

In comparison, approximately 0.8% of all children and young people in South Australia were the subject of a substantiation of abuse or neglect in 2023-24.³⁶

These figures must be interpreted with caution, noting that a higher number or proportion of substantiations does not necessarily mean that more children and young people in care were subject to abuse or neglect. These figures may also reflect changed community approaches to making child protection reports, and departmental responses to such reports.

It is concerning to observe, though, that the proportion of children and young people subject to a substantiation of abuse is considerably higher for those in care than for their peers in the community. This may be influenced by factors such as increased documentation and scrutiny of the lives of children and young people, and resource allocation towards investigation notifications for those in care. However, it may also be reflective of increased vulnerability for children and young people in care.

In any event, the indicator for 2023-24 demonstrates that the vulnerability and support needs are high: with nearly 1 in 20 children and young people who were in care during the year also experiencing a substantiation of abuse or neglect. Significant attention is required towards addressing those vulnerabilities and meeting that need, including through resourcing for care services – as addressed later in this report. Attention is also required towards the broader scope of government services affecting children and young people in care, including criminal justice measures to interrupt child abuse and exploitation.

Key Takeaways

1. The rate of substantiated abuse and neglect among children in care increased to 4.2% in 2023-24, up from 3.1% the year before.
2. Children in care are already highly vulnerable. More resources and stronger protections are needed to prevent abuse and provide better support for children in care.

Placement stability

The South Australia's government media release – [South Australia leads the way in finding stable homes for young people](#) – states that South Australia achieved greater stability

for children and young people living in care, with 88.5% of children in care for two years or more residing in one or two placements.

³⁵ This indicator includes children and young people who were in an OOHC placement during the year, as well as those in other supported placements during the year. 'Abuse' includes physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

³⁶ The proportion relating to children and young people in an OOHC or other supported placement during the year is an exact figure. There is no comparable figure regarding all children and young people who were in South Australia during the year. The approximation is calculated based on the number of children and young people in South Australia at 30 June 2024.

This figure was two percentage points higher than 2022-23, and is above the national proportion of 87.2%. The statement notes that it 'represents the state's best result in this area'.

While this is a positive sign, it should be considered in the context of other placement stability indicators for children and young people exiting care.

When I took a deeper dive on these indicators, I looked at children and young people who exited care in 2023-24 after being in care for 2 or more years. I did this because I commonly see placement breakdowns and instability through my advocacy function. When I looked into this, I found that 1 in 8 (13.3%) children and young people had experienced more than 10 placements.

That figure rose by 1.3 percentage points, from 12.0% in 2022-23. This is more than double the national figure, at 1 in 19 (5.4%).

The discrepancy between these figures indicates that relying on the number of placements over a two-year time period is not the best indicator for placement stability in South Australia. While it is positive to see this proportion increasing, it does not reflect the cumulative impacts of placement moves for children and young people. This is highly significant for South Australia, given the high proportion of children and young people in care who are on long-term guardianship orders.³⁷

When children and young people exit care, their trauma histories and experiences in care travel with them. Understanding the level of placement instability experienced by children and young people leaving care is highly significant to inform both policy and case planning to support for children and young people leaving care, across a range of state and federal government services including housing, income support, education and training and health.

Key Takeaways

1. There are multiple ROGS indicators for measuring placement stability – and it's important to read them together.
2. 88.5% of children and young people in care for two years lived in one or two placements during the past two years. This is a good sign that most children and young people in care on long-term orders had relatively stable placements for the past couple of years.
3. But we must look at a longer time period to truly understand how children experience placement stability or instability. 1 in 8 children leaving care in 2023-24 who have been in care for 2 or more years had more than 10 placements, which is worse than last year and double the national rate.
4. Focusing only on children with fewer placements ignores the struggles of those who are moved frequently.
5. Placement instability has long-term effects on children's well-being, making it harder for them to succeed after leaving care.

³⁷ ROGS does not report on the proportion of children and young people on a care and protection order, by the status of the order. Based on the most recent dataset published by the AIHW for the 2022-23 financial year, at 30 June 2023, 79.2% of children and young people on care and protection orders were on finalised long-term guardianship orders. This was the highest proportion in Australia, well above the proportion of 52.5%, nationally: AIHW, *Child Protection Australia 2022-23* (2023), Table S4.10.

6. More focus is needed on improving overall placement stability and support for children transitioning out of care, rather than just reporting positive statistics.

NAPLAN results

In 2023-24, there was a change in ROGS reporting on NAPLAN results. Rather than indicators regarding the number of children and young people achieving national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy, reporting has changed to the proportion of children and young people achieving the following 'proficiency' in literacy and numeracy: (1) Exceeding; (2) Strong; (3) Developing; (4) Needs additional support; and (5) Exempt.

Due to this change in indicators, figures for 2023-24 are not directly comparable to previous years. However, those figures do compare results for children and young people in care with all children and young people in South Australia – and the results are concerning:

- **For literacy:** 31.8% of children and young people in care achieved 'strong' or 'exceeding' proficiency at Year 5 level, compared to 71.4% of all children and young people in South Australia
- **For numeracy:** 21.5% of children and young people in care achieved 'strong' or 'exceeding' proficiency at Year 5 level, compared to 61.8% of all children and young people in South Australia

The reasons why children and young people in care may be disengaged from school, need additional support for learning, or otherwise not score highly on standardised testing

metrics are complex. Relevant factors include the impact of:

- Trauma experienced in the home, upon child and adolescent development
- Traumatic experiences that may have occurred at school, upon the safety of and engagement with the learning environment³⁸
- Educational disruption arising from high rates of suspension, exclusion and expulsion³⁹
- Barriers to school attendance and engagement arising from particular care environments, especially for those living in residential care⁴⁰
- Broader gaps in educational outcomes for children and young people overrepresented in the care population, including those affected by intergenerational poverty, with disability, from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and Aboriginal children and young people.

Considering these factors, it is important to highlight that educational outcomes for children and young people in care should not be treated as directly comparable to the broader child population. Attempting to bridge this gap through mainstream educational approaches available under Australian curriculums is unlikely to achieve success – and it does not account for what individual successes look like.

³⁸ For example, it is common for children and young people to report distress around being removed by the DCP, or interviewed by DCP or SAPOL, while at school; where families are impacted by family and domestic violence, children and young people may also have experienced stalking behaviours from parents or other family members connected to school drop-off and pick-up times.

³⁹ See, Professor Linda J Graham et al, The Centre for Inclusive Education, *Inquiry into Suspension, Exclusion and Expulsion Processes in South Australian Government Schools: Final Report* (2020).

⁴⁰ For a detailed discussion of this topic, see my [2022-23 Annual Report as Child and Young Person's Visitor](#), pp. 61-62.

Success for a child or young person may look like being enrolled in school for the first time ever, playing games with other children and building social skills, making it to school for a day a week, asking an adult for help, learning to speak English, or learning basic reading or numeracy skills at their own pace.

These individual hurdles and achievements must be celebrated – but NAPLAN results as standardised testing simply do not (or cannot) measure these successes. This can obscure highly positive practices and efforts by schools with high enrolment from children and young people in care and/or other developmentally vulnerable population group.

This is one of the reasons that the NAPLAN process is controversial, and subject to conflicting evidence and expert opinion.⁴¹ Many argue that it is an important mechanism for understanding learning needs of children and young people and directing resourcing towards geographical areas and schools with the greatest need. However, relevant criticisms include its bias in results for

children and young people of different abilities, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as the emotional and psychological impacts of participating in standardised testing for children and young people who are struggling within mainstream learning environments.

While noting the complexity and controversy underlying these factors, I observe that these figures can be interpreted to highlight the major gap in educational outcomes for primary-school children and young people in care.

In monitoring this area in future years, my attention will be firmly fixed on striving for improvement in the number of children and young people in care who are achieving exceeding and strong proficiency in literacy and numeracy. And, in advocating for children and young people in care, my continued efforts will be on recognising and celebrating what success looks like *for them*.

Key Takeaways

1. Children in care have significantly lower NAPLAN results than other students—31.8% reach strong/exceeding literacy levels (compared to 71.4% of all students), and 21.5% reach strong/exceeding numeracy levels (compared to 61.8%).
2. Many factors make it harder for children in care to succeed in school, including trauma, school disruptions, and difficulties attending regularly.
3. NAPLAN doesn't fully reflect success for children in care—small but meaningful progress (like attending school regularly or learning social skills) isn't measured.
4. NAPLAN itself is controversial, with some seeing it as a useful tool, while others argue it unfairly disadvantages vulnerable students.
5. The focus should be on improving real outcomes for children in care, not just raising test scores, by giving them better support and celebrating their progress in a way that reflects their unique challenges.

⁴¹ See, eg, Blaise Joseph, *Why We Need NAPLAN* (2018); contra Amanda Heffernan et al, Monash University, *Perceptions of Teachers and Teaching in Australia* (2019).

Measure 4: Equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people⁴²

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people have historically – and continue to – experience inequality, discrimination and racism within South Australia’s child protection and care system. Monitoring these areas requires a primary focus on redressing these inequities and combatting racial discrimination.

At 30 June 2024, 1,824 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people were living in care – 37.1% of the care population, and one in eleven Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in South Australia.

Compared to 30 June 2023, this was only a slight increase of 2 children and young people – or 0.1%. This was significantly lower than the increase in the previous financial year, where there was 3.3% growth. It is also significantly lower than the national increase in the number of Aboriginal children and young people in care, of 1.0%.

This is a positive sign of progress – and much needed, after the impacts of entries to OOHC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in recent years.

Between 30 June 2019 and 30 June 2024, the number of Aboriginal children and young people in care increased by 33.6%, compared to 17.8% for non-Aboriginal children and young people. Over that time, there was an increase of 927 children and young people in care; with 49.7% of that growth attributable to the rising number of Aboriginal children and young people in care.

These are alarming figures. They tell a story in stark opposition to the national policy direction of all governments, to work towards Closing the Gap Target 12 – which requires a reduction of 45% in the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in OOHC, by 2031.

To contextualise South Australia’s figures – nationally, there was a 14.9% increase in the number of Aboriginal children and young people in care over the same period. This contrasted with a 1.6% reduction in the number of non-Aboriginal children and young people in care.

These figures demonstrate that, around Australia, governments are not making progress to towards responsibilities and commitments to meet Closing the Gap Target 12. But they also show that, in South Australia, Aboriginal children and young people face a double jeopardy arising from:

- The socioeconomic drivers of their disproportionate overrepresentation in OOHC, which are present to varying extents in all Australian jurisdictions, and
- Factors specific to the South Australian child protection system that are leading to more children and young people – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – growing up in care, against the national trend.

With one in eleven Aboriginal children and young people growing up in care, outcomes and equity for Aboriginal children and young people are deeply tied to experiences in care. This makes it essential to measure progress against all Closing the Gap targets, specific for Aboriginal children and young people care – and direct priority resourcing to improve those experiences.

⁴² Data source for figures in this section are ROGS 2025, Tables 16A.2, 16A.3, 16A.21, 16A.22, 16A.23 and 16A.42.

As discussed above regarding quality of care indicators, data reporting limitations significantly restrict the ability to meaningfully monitor equity indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care. This impacts government capacity to identify and direct resourcing towards priority target areas.

It is anticipated that the *Safe and Supported* Evaluation and Monitoring Strategy will progressively lead to increased reporting capability, with a focus on substantive indicators related to all five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle: Prevention, Partnership, Placement, Participation and Connection.

At this time, ROGS reporting is strongly focused on the Placement element. As such, monitoring equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people based on this data source is limited to the following indicators:

- Placement in residential care
- Living in other supported placements – primarily through third-party order care arrangements
- Placement category in family-based care, including with relatives or kin and Aboriginal carers.

Residential care

It is positive to observe that there was a slight decrease in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in residential care – by 6 individuals (2.1%) from 290 children and young people at 30 June 2023 to 284 at 30 June 2024. This contrasted with an increase of 13.0% in the same figure, nationally.

While only small, this is the first time that there has been a decrease in the number of Aboriginal children and young people in residential care since 30 June 2021.

I will monitor this figure again in 2024-25, with the hope of seeing further progress.

Family-based care

Placement with relatives and kin

It was also positive to observe the increase in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people placed with relatives and kin – with this proportion increasing from 54.9% at 30 June 2023, to 55.9% at 30 June 2024. I talk more about this and later, but raise now that definitions and categorisations of carer types is impacting this figure. This gives cause to question the legitimacy to these numbers.

This is a higher proportion than for non-Aboriginal children and young people, at 48.3% at 30 June 2024. However, it is important to highlight that data for non-Aboriginal children and young people is not directly comparable, as a broader definition of placement with relatives and kin applies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

The ROGS 2025 defines ‘relatives/kin’ as people who are family or close friends, or are members of a child or young person’s community (in accordance with their culture) who are reimbursed (or who have been offered but declined reimbursement) by the state and territory for the care of a child. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the ROGS definition notes that a kinship carer may be another Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person who is a member of their community, a compatible community or from the same language group.

This definition has the potential to support improved recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and kinship structures. However, the power and control of classifying care arrangements as relative/kin placement lies with reporting jurisdictions. This creates a risk that placements will be classified as relative/kin, even where this is not in

alignment with family and kinship relationships as defined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Where this occurs, it can artificially inflate the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who are counted as living with relatives/kin, which can obscure the need for ongoing practice reflection and reform.

This issue was explored in the South Australian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People’s Inquiry into the application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. The Final Report stated:

The Inquiry heard that there is an issue with the definition of ‘kinship’; the Department determines that placements are deemed compliant with the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principle] when the carers are non-Aboriginal or are not recognised according to Aboriginal culture and kinship rules.⁴³

Finding 28 of that report was that ‘the Department for Child Protection is inappropriately applying a broader definition of “kinship” to kinship care. For Aboriginal

children this does not guarantee an Aboriginal kinship placement in accordance with Aboriginal customary rules of kinship’.⁴⁴

I share these observations, and consider that it is important to examine data in the fulsome context of the purpose and intent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle – to support Aboriginal children and young people to grow up within their family, culture and community.

Current data collection and reporting in the ROGS does not support qualitative analysis of the extent to which this is occurring. However, in considering this intent and purpose, it is salient to analyse data comparing:

- the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people placed with relatives or kin, in accordance with ROGS reporting, and
- those placed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers.

While the former has increased over the past five years (between 30 June 2019 and 30 June 2024), the latter has decreased.

Table 1: Comparison in proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in OOHC at 30 June 2019 and 30 June 2024, by carer type and cultural background of carer

Carer type	Carer cultural background	30 June 2019	30 June 2024	Diff.
Relative/kin	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	31.5%	32.4%	+0.9 pp
	Non-Aboriginal	19.4%	23.5%	+4.1pp
	All	50.9%	55.9%	+5.0pp
Other family-based carer	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	7.4%	5.6%	-1.8pp
	Non-Aboriginal	26.2%	22.2%	-4.0pp
	All	33.6%	27.8%	-5.8pp
Residential care	N/A	15.5%	16.3%	+0.8pp

⁴³ Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People (SA), Holding on to Our Future: Final Report of the Inquiry into the application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in the removal and placement of Aboriginal children and young people in South Australia (2024), p. 103.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

The above figures demonstrate that there has been a substantial decrease – 5.8 percentage points – in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in family-based care with someone other than a relative or kin. That change has been distributed across an increase in the number living in residential care (0.8 percentage points) and those living in relative or kin care (5.0 percentage points).

On its face, this could appear as broadly aligned with the policy direction underlying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, which promotes placement with a child or young person’s family as a high priority to achieve children and young people’s best interests.

However, the way in which government systems have kept control of the meaning of ‘family’ for reporting purposes undermines transparency regarding true placement outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

The above figures demonstrate that the most substantial movement over the past five years has been from non-Aboriginal carers who *are not* categorised as relatives or kin, to placements with non-Aboriginal carers who *are* categorised as relatives or kin.

Significantly, an Aboriginal child or young person may be ‘counted’ as living in a

relative/kin placement for the purpose of ROGS reporting if they are living with a neighbour, a teacher from their school or a close family friend – including non-Aboriginal community members, and those whose connections are with non-Aboriginal family.⁴⁵ These relationships may not be defined as family by either Western or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship structures.

This does not accord with the intent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle to increase placement with family, including Aboriginal family.

In fact, while there has been an increase of 5.0 percentage points in the number of children placed with non-Aboriginal relatives or kin, the increase for placement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander relatives or kin is far more modest at 0.9 percentage points. The remainder of the growth – 4.1 percentage points – has been for placement with non-Aboriginal relatives or kin.

Further, overall, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living with Aboriginal carers has decreased by 0.9 percentage points, from 38.9% at 30 June 2019 to 38.0% at 30 June 2024. In comparison, there has been slight overall growth in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people placed with non-Aboriginal carers;

⁴⁵ For internal purposes, DCP applies a more narrow definition of Kinship Care, which recognises carers directly related to the child or young person by blood, marriage, own community or according to Aboriginal cultures and/or kinship rules or Torres Strait Islander cultures and/or kinship rules. In some circumstances, a person may still be classified as a kinship carer in instances where they have a close, family-like relationship with the child or young person or where there is a close, long-standing connection to the child or young person’s family of origin, as determined by the department.

While this definition is used for internal purposes, DCP’s public annual reporting – including for the purposes of ROGS – also includes children and young people in ‘Specific Child Only’ (SCO) care as being in kinship care arrangements: Government of South Australia, DCP, *Statistical data*, accessed February 2025 <<https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/research-and-publications/statistical-data>>.

A SCO carer is a person approved to provide care to a specific child or young person with whom they have a connection (that does not fit the definition of kinship care) through their personal, professional or ethno-specific community life (which includes sharing a cultural, ethnic or religious community connection with the child or young person) without, in some instances, directly knowing the child or young person or their family. The definition of a specific child only carer includes a person of Aboriginal cultural background that is not known to the child or young person and is not considered to be kin by the family or those with cultural authority for the child or young person: Government of South Australia, DCP, *Carer approvals, agreements and cancellations for family-based carers Procedure* (v 2.6, March 2024).

from 45.6% at 30 June 2019, to 45.7% at 30 June 2024.

This trend indicates that current approaches and resources may be skewed towards success for finding, assessing and supporting non-Aboriginal families and other non-Aboriginal family-based carers. In addition, the figures raise the question regarding what portion of the growth in the proportion of children and young people living in relative/kin care may be attributable to policy shifts in categorising care arrangements for

non-Aboriginal people caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Either way, it is clear that a fundamental shift is required to achieve meaningful success in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to grow up in homes where they are surrounded by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and community.

Key Takeaways

1. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in "kinship care" has increased, but much of this is due to definitions rather than actual placements with Aboriginal family members.
2. The government counts non-Aboriginal carers (including neighbours, teachers, family friends) as "kin," even if they are not part of the child's cultural kinship network in its public reporting.
3. A lower proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are being placed with Aboriginal carers, while placements with non-Aboriginal carers have slightly increased.
4. These results indicate that current policies and resources are favouring supporting non-Aboriginal carers rather than Aboriginal family-based placements.
5. A major shift is needed to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up in Aboriginal families and communities, as intended by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.

Other supported placements

Another area of concern is the high growth in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in 'other supported placements' – which primarily consist of third-party order care arrangements.⁴⁶

At 30 June 2024, 80 Aboriginal children and young people were living in other supported placements. This was 20.7% of all children and young people living in other supported placements. That proportion is lower than the overall figure for Aboriginal children and young people in care, at 37.1%. However, it is concerning to note the growth occurring in past years.

⁴⁶ As discussed earlier in this report at [Exits from OOHC](#), it can be estimated that above 95% of other supported placements are third-party orders.

In 2023-24, there was an increase of 14.3% in the number of Aboriginal children and young people in other supported placements – compared to 10.4% increase in the number of non-Aboriginal children and young people.

At 30 June 2019, there were 27 Aboriginal children and young people living in other supported placements. Over the course of five years, this number has risen by 196.3%. In comparison, the number of non-Aboriginal children and young people has risen by 73.4%.

Earlier in this report, I identified that there appears to be targeted approach of applying for third-party orders by the DCP. These figures indicate that approach is concentrated

towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

For the reasons discussed earlier in this report, these care arrangements should not be treated as a positive indicator or sign of success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. As highlighted by SNAICC in the Family Matters Report 2024, measuring progress against the true intention of Closing the Gap Target 12 – to reduce statutory intervention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family life – is undermined if ‘governments seek to achieve it by permanently removing children from their families and excluding them from the count of children in OOHC’.⁴⁷

Key Takeaways

1. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in "other supported placements" (mainly third-party orders) has increased by 196.3% in five years, far outpacing the increase for non-Aboriginal children (73.4%).
2. The government appears to be using third-party orders more for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, which raises concerns about whether this is truly in their best interests.
3. Third-party orders remove children from the official care system, but they don't necessarily mean children are placed with family or in culturally appropriate homes.
4. Advocacy groups warn that the government may be using these placements to make the child protection system "look better" by reducing official care numbers, rather than actually keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families together.
5. This trend goes against the Closing the Gap goal of reducing government intervention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family life—real progress would mean keeping more children with their families, not just shifting them to different categories of care.

⁴⁷ SNAICC – National Voice for our Children, *The Family Matters Report 2024* (2024), p 15.

Measure 5: Expenditure⁴⁸

One of the key levers for achieving change is adequately resourcing child protection, family support and OOHC programs. Whilst expenditure alone does not determine quality of care, adequate funding is essential to promoting the rights and best interests of children and young people in care.

All of the matters discussed in this report – areas of promise, and areas of concern – are deeply tied to resourcing decisions. In promoting reform, quality of care and equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, expenditure is key to either success or failure.

The money story is complicated, when it comes to child protection services expenditure. South Australia has a high proportion of child protection services expenditure which is directed towards care services.⁴⁹ Yet, this is not overall reflective of South Australia spending high amounts on the lives of individual children and young people in care. Primarily, it is attributable to a combination of South Australia's per capita rate of children and young people in care, and the proportion of that care population living in residential care.

The high costs associated with residential care can make these services a target for cost-cutting in child protection budgets – but it is essential to challenge such a direction. Discourse about the proportion of expenditure on care services – particularly residential care services – in South Australia must not be misunderstood as an indication that too much money is being spent on individual children and young people in these living arrangements. To the contrary, many growing up in these care arrangements miss out on very basic care, items and experiences that make a big difference to their lives, and

which we would all expect and want for our children.

Many reviews, inquiries and other reporting have pointed out the need to redress the imbalance in expenditure that comes from such high care services expenditure.⁵⁰ But I reiterate that this should not occur through a reduction in expenditure on care services – with the ongoing growth in the care and residential care population, any such reduction would be highly concerning.

The only way to achieve this rebalance is through *increasing* investment to provide services that children, young people and families need – across the child protection portfolio and more broadly.

Let me be clear: money is not the full story here. If it's directed towards the wrong areas, we can spend more and still not improve quality of care for children and young people. Conversely, we can achieve vast changes for children and young people's lives through small, everyday steps that cost nothing. The discussion, and the policy direction forward, is complex and requires mature, forward-thinking and child-focussed consideration.

With these considerations in mind, my monitoring regarding expenditure focuses on areas where service gaps in South Australia have detrimental consequences for children and young people, and measures that represent expenditure directed towards the

⁴⁸ Data source for figures in this section are ROGS 2025, Tables 16A.8, 16A.36 and 16A.37.

⁴⁹ In 2023-24, 79.7% of South Australia's child protection services expenditure was directed towards care services, compared to 64.9% nationally. Care services refers to the provision of OOHC services and other supported placements. Expenditure within this program area includes costs for placement services; carer assessments; case management; reunification efforts; carer payments; operating residential care facilities; and supports to prepare young people to transition from care.

⁵⁰ For a comprehensive discussion of this topic, see Kate Alexander, *Trust in Culture* (2022).

day-to-day lives of children and young people in care. Particularly, I monitor:

- Expenditure in 'early intervention' and prevention, and reunification services, as measured through Protective Intervention Services, Family Support Services and Intensive Family Support Services
- Expenditure per child in care, specific to their placement type (i.e., per child in family-based care and per child in residential care).

Increased expenditure in these areas is, generally speaking,⁵¹ key to achieving better outcomes for children and young people. Over time, this could also be expected to reduce the care services expenditure that is currently attributable to the high proportion of the care population in South Australia who are living in residential care.

Protective Intervention Services Expenditure

As highlighted earlier in this report, expenditure on PIS in South Australia decreased in 2023-24, by \$3.2 million from \$81.4 million in 2022-23 to \$78.2 million in 2023-24.

Per capita PIS expenditure on children and young people in the population in South Australia remains the lowest in the country, at \$206.66 in South Australia in 2023-24, compared to \$343.37 nationally. This was a decrease from \$216.54 in South Australia in 2022-23, compared to a small increase nationally from \$341.08.

The consequences of funding decisions for PIS are far-reaching, impacting upon the best interests and wellbeing (including safety) of children and young people in complex and nuanced ways. If the system is not properly resourced to respond to child protection reports, then pressure builds to triage out lower-level concerns and focus only on the most serious and imminent harm. This means that children who fall below that threshold, but still reasonably require an immediate statutory response, may be left in unsafe situations.

Further, missed opportunities to refer families to appropriate services may severely limit the choices available to social workers by the time those families reach the level of risk required to meet triage criteria. This has the potential to drive higher rates of children and young people entering care, when that outcome may have been avoidable if resources had been directed towards identifying and responding to concerns when they were first reported.⁵²

As highlighted earlier in this report, the South Australian government has identified the increased number of finalised investigations as an area of success for the child protection system. With respect to this assertion, I find it difficult to reconcile the severe strain I observe on individual case managers and social workers in DCP offices with increasing successes in this area. This raises serious concerns about the level of service response children, young people and families are receiving in the assessment of child protection reports and responses to substantiated abuse and neglect.

⁵¹ Noting that improved outcomes may also be achieved through redirection of existing resources. For example, the high expenditure on use of temporary agency staff is a potential target area through workforce and sectoral partnership strategies.

⁵² In 2016, the Nyland report observed that the considerable pressure on the Child Abuse Report Line at that time led to a declining proportion of screened-in notifications, with the result being a 'hollowing out of lower-level concerns from the child protection system, with fewer families and children receiving a response unless the concerns escalate': Hon. Margaret Nyland, *The life they deserve: Child Protection Systems Royal Commission* (2016), p 121. Six years later, a similar issue was identified in the Alexander Review, which described the front-end of the child protection system (relating to investigations and initial responses to child protection reports) as a 'bottleneck', with '[m]any children ... not receiving a service and the longer they wait the higher the risk': Alexander (n 41), p 112-13.

Key Takeaways

1. South Australia has cut \$3.2 million from protective intervention services, despite already spending the least per child compared to the rest of the country.
2. Lower funding results in only the most serious cases get attention, leaving many at-risk children without support.
3. Early intervention is key—without it, more children will end up being removed from their families, when prevention could have kept them safe at home.
4. Social workers and case workers are under extreme strain. Cutting child protection funding now may lead to worse outcomes later, both for children, with workforce and the system as a whole.

Family Support and Intensive Family Support Services Expenditure

As noted earlier in this report, there was a significant increase in **reported figures** for combined family support and intensive family support services expenditure in 2023-24 – increasing by \$34.3 million (44.2%) compared to 2022-23.

In part, these figures are reflective of highly positive budget initiatives for the 2023-24 financial year.

The 2023-24 State Budget papers outlined \$55.2 million in initiatives for family support and intensive family support services over a period of five years,⁵³ with an additional \$4 million subsequently directed towards relevant service area.⁵⁴

This equates to an approximately \$15 million increase in expenditure on these services in 2023-24.

However, the remainder of the increase in reported expenditure – just under \$20 million – is attributable to reclassification of expenditure for existing services. In previous years, these services were not included within relevant categories for the purposes of ROGS reporting, but have been captured from 2023-24.⁵⁵

Reporting accurately on South Australia's investment in the space of family support services and intensive family support services is essential to inform future policy direction. I am highly supportive of reporting changes to the extent that it contributes to South Australia's progress in this direction and accurately depicts relevant expenditure.

I must, though, include a note of caution around data comparability to previous years in South Australia, and national figures.

⁵³ The 2023-24 State Budget announced relevant initiatives including \$35.7 million over five years to increase targeted intensive family support services; \$13.4 million over five years to increase family group conferencing services; and \$6.1 million over four years for the Stronger Start Program, for family support services for at-risk first time parents: Government of South Australia, *State Budget 2023-24: Budget Overview: Budget Paper 1* (2023), p. 10.

⁵⁴ In response to this report, the Department of Human Services advised that approximately \$4 million expenditure was also directed towards the Strong Families, Strong Communities initiative, after the release of relevant budget papers for the 2023-24 financial year.

⁵⁵ The Department of Human Services provided this information, In response to this report.

The interpretative notes published in ROGS 2025 regarding South Australian data state that:

- Intensive family support services activity data is compiled from aggregate data provided by Community Sector Organisations (CSOs) and is not provided by all CSOs, and the data provided is not validated. SA has not been able to obtain activity data for all programs, therefore the cost per child receiving intensive family support services (IFSS) is likely to be overstated and should be interpreted with caution.
- In 2020-21, SA included a redesign of services (family support and intensive family support) within the Community Sector Organisations, effective 1 April 2021. The redesign of programs/services resulted in additional programs being included that were previously excluded as they were universal to all. During 2021-22 there was a further redesign and expansion in programs and services provided by umbrella agencies resulting in family preservation and protective intervention programs previously categorised as family support services becoming intensive in nature. From 2021-22, expenditure on intensive family support services includes programs which run beyond the six-month short-term time frame.

- Expenditure data prior to 2017-18 does not align with the child protection data manual for 2019-20. The revised cost allocation methodology from 2017-18 resulted in a shift of expenditure from Intensive Family Support Services and to a lesser extent Family Support Services to Child Protection.

These notes indicate considerable and ongoing complexities in interpreting South Australia data, and fluctuating criteria for the inclusion of expenditure. While noting highly positive budget initiatives, it would appear that direct comparison to previous financial years overstates the increase in expenditure.

South Australia has a strong need to invest more in family support services and intensive family support services. This investment is key to family preservation and preventing children and young people coming into care when they could safely stay with their families, with some extra support.

Simply put: we want to see expenditure rise in this area. To see meaningful results for the lives of children, young people and families, this must be attributable to an **actual increase** in expenditure.

Key Takeaways

1. Reported expenditure on family support and intensive family support services increased by \$34.3 million (44.2%) in 2023-24, which seems like a positive step.
2. Past changes in how spending is tracked make it difficult to compare data across years—so the increase is not as large as it seems.
3. Approximately \$20 million of the increase is attributable to existing services that were previously not captured in ROGS reporting.
4. Better tracking and transparency are needed to ensure that funding is actually going to the right programs.
5. Despite these concerns, continued investment in family support services is essential to keeping children safe and preventing unnecessary removals into care.

Expenditure per child in care

In 2023-24, South Australia directed the highest proportion of expenditure towards care services for an Australian jurisdiction, at 79.7%, compared to 64.9% nationally. This is consistent with a longstanding jurisdictional trend over past years.

Overall, expenditure per placement night is higher than the national figure – at \$415.98 per placement night in South Australia, compared to \$373.92 nationally. This figure requires more unpacking however, to account for South Australia's high proportion of children and young people living in residential care.

In 2023-24, the annual expenditure for a child in non-family-based care was \$608,542 – compared to \$71,436 for a child in family-based care.⁵⁶ With 17.3% of children and young people in OOHC living in non-family-based care, this 'skews' the data and creates an artificially high cost per placement night.

Even with this noted, it is concerning to observe that, between 2018-19 and 2023-24, the cost per placement night increased by 13.9% in South Australia, compared to 50.7% nationally. This in part reflects high rates of increase in the residential care population in a number of jurisdictions – most notably, Queensland. However, it also indicates lower investment per child in care in South Australia, and potentially less responsiveness to high increase in cost-of-living factors such as housing and COVID-19 related workforce changes.

It is also concerning to compare South Australian expenditure, with annual figures

for those jurisdictions that breakdown cost by family-based and non-family based care. As at 2023-24, this was limited to South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and Victoria.

For children and young people in family-based care, South Australian expenditure in 2023-24 at \$71,436 was above the average of \$61,424 for other reporting jurisdictions – WA, Tasmania and Victoria. This marked a significant increase of 8.0% in expenditure per child in family-based care in South Australia, from \$66,145 at 30 June 2023. This may be attributable in part to positive initiatives announced in the 2023-24 State Budget, including:

- **Additional kinship care assessments:** \$4 million over four years to intensify effort on assessing and recruiting extended family to care for children and young people
- **Increased carer payments:** \$32.1 million over four years to increase carer payments for family-based carers to assist with the day-to-day costs of caring for a child or young person
- **Family reunification services:** \$2.1 million over four years to increase the capacity of reunification services available to children and young people in care and their families.⁵⁷

For children and young people in non-family-based care the figures tell a different story. The average annual expenditure per child or young person in other reporting jurisdictions was \$1.0m, compared to \$0.6m in South Australia. The growth in this area of expenditure was 3.4% in South Australia, compared to 4.0% nationally including other reporting jurisdictions.

⁵⁶ Based on the number of children and young people in non-family-based care, and in family-based care, at 30 June 2024.

⁵⁷ Government of South Australia, *State Budget 2023-24: Budget Overview: Budget Paper 1* (2023), p. 10.

At a basic level, high expenditure on residential care services is not really being directed towards the lives of children and young people. It goes to purchasing or leasing properties, and paying carers a wage. When expenditure for these services is spread across higher numbers of children and young people, the result may be that small niceties or anything above the bare essential gets cut; there's pressure to fill an extra bed in the house even if it is not in the best interests of the young people living there; or compromises may be made about the number of staff who can be present at a house to provide care.

Whenever discussions are had about rebalancing child protection expenditure, this is an essential priority area – to rebalance the

proportion of expenditure directed towards property costs and salaries into a real and meaningful difference in the lives of children and young people growing up in care.

This cannot be achieved through a cost reduction mindset. It can only be achieved through an investment mindset. This increase must relate specifically to funds spent on the child or young person and their experience in

care; not just the infrastructure and workforce, but also their everyday needs, so they are afforded the same rights and privileges as children and young people who are living well with their families. To grow up in care is not a reason for children and young people to miss out.

Key Takeaways

1. South Australia spends more on care services than any other state, but a lot of this is due to high numbers of children in expensive residential care.
2. It costs \$608,542 per year for a child in residential care, compared to just \$71,436 for family-based care.
3. More money is being invested in family-based care, which is a good step forward.
4. Much of the residential care budget goes toward properties and wages, not directly improving children's lives.
5. There needs to be a dedicated focus on increasing investment in children's experiences, rather than just maintaining the system's costs.
6. Children in care should have the same rights and opportunities as other children, and funding should be directed toward making that a reality.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the child protection indicators published in the ROGS 2025, I see strong potential for reform and improvement. Striving for better for children and young people is – and must – be the ongoing focus in the child protection and family support services system.

I see the foundations that have been laid for the change that these systems need, in order to do better for children, young people and their families. But I also feel a sense of caution, and encourage others to approach decision-making with due care as we navigate the steps forward. While the foundations are there, now is the time that we must remain vigilant and purposeful towards progressing the intent of child protection reform in South Australia. Honest, transparent and thoughtful analysis is required regarding those policy directions where we must stay the course, and those that require correction and amendment.

My key reflections are:

- The wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia, and especially those in care, hinges on a more sustainable child protection system – which prioritises children and young people growing up with their families.
- Children and young people in care, particularly those in residential care, are facing the most extreme impacts of pressures upon the child protection and family support system to reduce expenditure
- The level of need sitting within South Australia families and communities is not being serviced by current structures and expenditure. The way forward requires a combination of legislative reform, investment commitment and changed approaches to partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and organisations.

At the beginning of this report, I acknowledged the South Australian government's public statements regarding identified areas of success. It is unfortunate to observe that, in my opinion, those areas highlighted as successes do not withstand the scrutiny of more detailed analysis.

While government highlights a reduced rate of children and young people entering care, growth is growth. This is against the national trend.

The message is that South Australia is leading the way in finding safe and stable placements, but the figures relied upon do not bear this out. In fact, South Australia has:

- The second highest proportion of children and young people exiting care after two or more years in care, having experienced more than 10 placements while in care
- The second lowest proportion of children and young people exiting care to a 'permanency arrangement' (ie, reunification or third-party orders) and not returning to care within 12 months, as a proportion of all children and young people in an OOHC placement during the relevant financial year.

While government states that the proportion of finalised investigations has increased, this outcome is logically inconsistent with reduced expenditure on Protective Intervention Services – which calls into question how these results are being achieved, and whether it is in the best interests of children and young people who require fulsome assessment of child protection reports related to them.

Taking all these matters into account, I must reflect upon the legislative reform bill currently before Parliament, the Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Bill 2024.

Legislative reform is critically required at this time. I have provided detailed rationale across three separate submissions, outlining the reasons why I believe the Bill will not achieve the reform that is required – and, in some places, moves the system in the wrong direction. I am not alone in making these observations.

To sum up, reform is critical, and we can't afford to get it wrong.

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