



As Eye See It

Project report

An exhibition of black and white
photographs taken by young
people living in out of home care

Acknowledgements

All the young people who so honestly shared their experiences with us through their words and photographs.

The staff and carers who supported the young people in their care to participate in this project.

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Melton Foster Care



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Executive summary

As Eye See It offered young people in out of home care (residential care, foster care, kinship care) an opportunity to share their experiences and stories with the people who work with and care for them, and with the broader community.

Agencies providing out of home care services across Victoria were represented on the Project Working Group to develop **As Eye See It**. Seventy-six young people, mainly from residential care, participated, each taking six black and white photographs to represent their out of home care experiences and writing a short description of their photographs and the messages behind them.

While it was not the intention of the project, the messages communicated both through the photographs and the written accounts offered an insight into how the sector is travelling in regards to the Charter for children in out of home care (the Charter). In view of this, analysis of the project outcomes is organised, for the most part, around the principles in the Charter. In addition broader messages have been extracted from data provided via evaluation surveys and analysis of the written information provided by participants.

Survey data indicated that the project offered young people an opportunity to engage in and express themselves through a creative initiative.

For some it was their first experience with digital photography. The opportunity to own the camera was an incentive for some, but not all, to participate. A significant positive identified by young people who participated was the importance inferred by the scale of the launch event, which appears to have had a particularly positive impact on self-esteem.

Direct support from staff and carers in compiling young people's photos appears to have varied, but in most cases agencies involved indicated that they gained a great deal from participating, either on a one-to-one level with a client or as a result of the conversations that the project has raised within the organisation.

In all cases, staff and participants indicated an enthusiasm for future projects and a commitment to both participate and support subsequent activities.

Recommendations resulting from this evaluation fall into four categories:

1. Positive aspects of the project to be replicated

The initial recommendation is that *As Eye See It* should be repeated in the future. The benefits to young people, staff and agencies warrant development and expansion of the project. Given the strength of the messages that emerged from the voices of young people articulated through the project, **As Eye See It** has the potential to impact policy at organisational and governmental levels and it should be supported to do so.

2. Areas for development

As is to be expected, as a first attempt at a project, **As Eye See It**, although well planned, has some areas for development and improvement. These relate largely to the timelines for implementation and the kind of information that is provided to young people and their supporters.

3. Areas for future focus

A handful of the principles in the Charter were not referenced in any specific way through the photographs or written accounts of young people. In some cases the absence of reference could be seen as concerning and as such these require specific focus, either in the next *As Eye See It* projects or in 'spin off' initiatives. These areas are:

- Support for Aboriginal children and young people to feel proud and strong in their own culture;
- Confidence in the fact that information about children and young people is only shared

with people in order to help people look after them;

- Access to the best possible education and training;
- Support to participate in family traditions and to learn about/be involved with cultural and religious groups that are important to them;
- Support in preparing themselves to leave care and support after they have left;
- Understanding of who to talk to when they (children and young people) are feeling unhappy.

4. Initiatives resulting from this project

These recommendations emerge from the question “how do we make sure these messages are not lost?” and offer ideas that have been drawn from the words of participants, staff and carers. They also reflect recognition of

the power of providing a young person with a camera to tell the adults in their world what they need.

Specifically there are recommendations for:

- Development of resources to support staff and influence policy-makers;
- Exploration of potential ‘spin off’ projects using different mediums, but similar principles;
- Development of an advocacy strategy to address some of the issues raised by young people.

The Working Group is already exploring ways in which to develop *As Eye See It* to benefit a larger group and spread the messages further. This report and the recommendations enclosed will support that development.

Background

In June 2008 The Salvation Army Westcare identified a need to provide young people living in out of home care with an opportunity to express what is important to them and what it is like being in care.

Westcare then approached the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner with a proposal to provide young people living in out of home care with an opportunity to participate in a photo exhibition.

Bernie Geary, the Child Safety Commissioner, personally supported the proposal as a way of:

- Allowing young people to express how they see their life and what is important to them through the lens of a camera;
- Enabling young people’s voices to be heard through the use of a powerful medium such as photography;
- Bringing about greater public understanding of children’s experiences in care.

The Commissioner wrote to every out of care agency in Victoria inviting their participation in the project.

Project

Eleven agencies collaborated to enable 76 young people, mainly from residential care, to produce 450 images representing their personal journey and experiences in out of home care.

A Working Group including representatives from out of home care providers, CREATE Foundation, The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner and The Department of Human Services (DHS) met over several months regarding the timelines, the exhibition space, the process for submitting photographs and much more.

Agencies purchased digital cameras through the Working Group, distributed them to young people and supported them to compose, take and select the photographs that would represent their story. Among their photographs all participants had to include a shot of their right eye.

Participants were allowed to keep the cameras they used in exchange for their participation.

Alongside their photographs, young people were asked to produce a short piece of written work to outline their experiences in care, explain their choice of photograph and/or introduce themselves.

The photographs and written pieces were professionally mounted, all in the same format, on black display boards.

In February 2009 these boards were displayed at a ten-day exhibition in the Atrium at Federation Square, Melbourne.

On February 10th the exhibition was launched by the Child Safety Commissioner and Telmo Languiller, Parliamentary Secretary for Human Services, in front of over 300 people including young people who had participated, staff and carers from various agencies and representatives from DHS and the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner.

A glossy brochure containing all the written work and a selection of the photographs was produced to be given to all participants, handed out at the launch and made available during the exhibition.

The exhibition was staffed by volunteers from the various partner agencies over the ten days.

Following the initial exhibition and as a result of requests and suggestions the exhibition was moved to the lobby of DHS offices on Lonsdale St in Melbourne.

It has since travelled to various locations including:

- Child Safety Commissioner's Debutant Ball – Melbourne Town Hall;
- Resi Rocks Forum – Etihad Stadium;
- Resilient Families need Resilient Workers Symposium – Melbourne Cricket Ground;
- Coalition for Change – Lancemore Hill Convention Centre;
- Child Protection Week – Melbourne Town Hall;
- Youth Affairs Council of Victoria State Conference – Mecure Ballarat Hotel & Convention Centre;
- Asia Pacific Regional Conference on Child Abuse & Neglect – Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre.

A DVD presentation of the *As Eye See It* exhibition was also produced and shown at the Southern Metropolitan Regional Home Based Carers Dinner.

In early 2010 agencies were invited to collect the professionally mounted work so they could be returned to the participants.

Evaluation data

Following the exhibition evaluation, surveys were sent to all young people who participated, any staff and/or carers who had supported them and all members of the Working Group that supported the project.

This data was combined with information extracted from the written accounts by participants where those accounts offered measurable data to produce the following information.

Youth/participant data

The length of care experiences for young people who participated in the *As Eye See It* project range from a few months to several years. In some cases, they have been in care since they were a matter of weeks old, while others came to the system in their mid to late teens.

Of the 44 participants who made mention of the length of their experience in the care system:

- the majority made no mention of the *number of placements* they had experienced in that time;
- 15 made specific mention of multiple placements, including one young person who had experienced over seven foster care and four residential care placements in only two years;
- three participants mentioned a single or long-term stable placement.

“I’ve been in lots of different placements which has made me feel upset and frustrated.”

Of the 76 participants, completed evaluation surveys were received from nearly 15%. Survey respondents included four males and seven females, with an age range from nine years to seventeen years old. Among the group, there was also one young person who identified as Aboriginal.

Young people from a broad range of participating agencies responded and identified themselves as being linked to residential care, foster care (home

based care), adolescent support programs and DHS.

Of those who responded:

- 46% had not previously done any digital photography;
- 46% had used a digital camera for photographs of people;
- one participant had used a digital camera for a school project before.

Despite the varied experience, all found the cameras easy to use – in some cases they experimented to get the hang of it first. All respondents got to keep the camera after the project and they fully intend to use it in the future.

The majority of young people got involved in the project for similar reasons. The top three reasons given for participation were:

- Because I like photography (64%);
- Because I got a free camera (64%);
- Because I like the idea of expressing myself through photography (64%).

55% also indicated that they got involved because they want people to know what it is like to be in care. While a further 36% felt it was just something to do. None indicated that they had been forced to participate.

Just over half the young people who responded indicated that they had worked with a staff member or carer to complete the project. Of this group, 67% felt that the experience had a positive impact on their relationship with that person. They indicated it had enabled them to spend more time together, to feel closer to them and also to show them who and what is important in their life.

Just over 90% of the respondents felt they had been able to express themselves clearly through photography. In the instance where they were unsure, one indicated that they wished they had written more to accompany their photos, because

they noticed in the exhibition that others had written much more than they had.

While only one respondent indicated that there may have been ways that getting their message across could have been made easier (over 90% didn't feel they had experienced any barriers to getting their message across), 27% made suggestions for improvements including:

- Being given more time to consider their choice of photographs and messages;
- Having the opportunity to talk to other young people involved in the project.

Most of the young people who responded had attended the launch. Those who did not attend cited the following reasons: school commitments, not knowing about it, or forgetting, as their reasons for not coming along.

Despite not going, they all expressed positive views on the impact of knowing the launch took place in such a public location with such prestigious guests and so much 'fanfare'. Their feelings ranged from "OK" through "happy" to "good" and "proud".

"I felt very happy and proud of myself. I was happy that I met the Commissioner and I had photos taken of me standing next to him."

Over 90% of respondents want to see the exhibition displayed in more locations, so that more people can see it and be exposed to their messages. Among those they feel should see it are:

- DHS staff;
- Carers;
- Other young people in care;
- Their families and friends;
- Workers from the out of home care system.

Others just felt that everyone, or as many people as possible, should be exposed to the exhibition.

While they are generally happy to have their

pictures displayed elsewhere, one respondent indicated that they would like to get their photos back once the exhibitions are finished, so that they have them to keep when they leave care.

Other suggestions for what could be done with the photographs now included:

- Making a DVD of the words and pictures (36%);
- Returning them to those who took them (36%);
- Making them into a book (27%);
- Making them into a resource for workers to help them understand how young people feel (27%).

All respondents thought that the project should be repeated in the future and indicated that they would participate in similar projects in the future.

Ideas for future projects include:

- A video project of 'real life';
- A wall of fame about 'your life in care';
- Children giving talks;
- A DVD or film project for TV where young people get to talk about their experiences.

When asked what they thought had been done well, young people indicated that the overall concept – giving young people a voice – was an important part of the success of the project. They also indicated that the added bonus of getting to keep the camera was a benefit to them. Some indicated that the quality of the work was important – the exhibition location, the black and white photography and the prestige of the launch.

The only two suggestions for improvements in the overall project were to hold the launch on a weekend and to set up a beer stand at the launch!

Staff/carer data

Nine staff from five agencies across various out of home care program areas responded to the survey. Three of those staff were also members of the Inter-Agency Working Group responsible for driving



This photo was taken of the Richmond flats where I used to live.

Brant

the project. Unfortunately no surveys were received from carers, which may indicate a need to improve our direct communication with carers supporting young people in this project.

The majority had worked with only one young person on their photography and writing, but in some cases multiple clients (up to three) had been supported by an individual staff member to undertake the project.

Staff were asked to identify any barriers they had experienced in supporting young people to participate. In three cases, the timescales were cited as issues. One also noted that the lack of time and resources meant that even though the young person they worked with had some great ideas, they were unable to transport them to the locations required to action those ideas. Also, with more time one worker indicated they may have been able to get more young people involved.

In addition to time, some reference was made to issues specific to their client, such as anxiety, lack

of self-belief and inability to think creatively about wording to accompany their photographs.

75% of respondents spent between two and four hours working on the project with clients while one spent less than two hours and one spent two days.

Only 50% of staff had needed to work with their client to help them understand how the cameras worked, but all had spent time (of varying lengths) with their clients discussing what sort of pictures they might take to represent themselves. In addition, they all spent time discussing with clients what they hoped to communicate through their pictures, with 50% saying they spent a lot of time on this.

The need for support varied from client to client. Some staff indicated that their clients were empowered enough to explore the project without support and that they as staff were reluctant to interfere with that process. Others noted that their clients required a great deal of guidance (rather than direction) to consider what they felt was important to them.

Over 87% of respondents felt that the project had stimulated new or helpful discussions between themselves and their clients. The benefits were noted both in terms of the worker's improved understanding of the young person's feelings and experience (both in regards to their general care experience and their experience of the specific agency or program), and in the ability of the young person to reflect on their experience.

"Young people were very engaging when taking the photographs and the time away from their home gave them a chance to talk about issues without realising it. I had one client speak about his anger and agree to anger management counselling, something he had never wanted to address previously."

Overall, workers all felt that the project had benefited their relationship with clients. 25% indicated that it had 'hugely' benefited their relationship, and a further 38% noting that it had benefited their relationship 'a little'.

In terms of the benefit to the client directly, the majority of respondents felt that they had gained a little (38%) or a lot (38%), with a further 25% indicating that their clients had benefited hugely from their involvement.

"The day of the launch my client told me that this was one of the best days in her life. Seeing all the people turn up on the day just to see her photos and all the young people's photos."

Much like the young people, staff felt that the things that were done well were the quality of the display, the overall concept behind the project and the launch day itself. They also noted that the booklet accompanying the exhibition was a great keepsake and that the role of the Working Group had been a great support.

The theme of the suggestions for improvements related largely to timing – more time to carry out

the project and a longer exhibition were both suggested.

And like the young people, all the staff respondents would encourage both young people to get involved in future projects and encourage their agencies to support similar projects in the future.

Inter-agency Working Group members

Seven Working Group members from five agencies responded to the survey.

While each agency received between six and ten cameras, only one agency used all of those cameras for the project. In each case, between one and two of the cameras did not 'translate' into participation on the part of a young person.

Members gave a breadth of reasons that they felt young people had been attracted to the project, ranging from the opportunity for creative expression and the chance to have their voices heard, to support from staff and carers, the opportunity for public recognition and the chance to get a free camera.

It was seen as a 'safe' way in which to express things that were important to them and to reflect on their journey.

People indicated that it had been, for the most part, easy to get staff involved with the project. However, they felt the most significant barrier was the timing, which prevented them from being able to fully discuss the project with staff and young people and may have contributed to the lower numbers of participants.

Working Group members gave anything from two days to several weeks of their time to make sure it happened.

There were mixed responses in regards to the level of information that was given to support the project.

Some people indicated that they received no information about how to use the cameras, but the

majority felt that they were self-explanatory or easy to work out anyway.

In regards to expectations around picture content, picture quality and written content, most people felt they understood what was required. A handful of people indicated that they got some information, but could have used more. One suggestion was to provide a clearer instruction sheet for future projects.

All respondents indicated that the project has stimulated new and helpful discussions within their agencies. Reflections have included looking at ways to encourage creative expression from young people through other projects, looking at the messages for the way in which they impact on service provision and if/when this project will happen again in the future. Over 57% of respondents felt the project had benefited their agency hugely with the majority citing awareness raising both internally and to the broader public. Over 70% felt their clients had benefited hugely also.

"They were given the opportunity to be proud of themselves! They were able to see that people were interested in them for positive reasons!"

The overwhelming response to the question about what had been done well indicated that the creation of a collaborative, multi-agency Working Group was key to the success of the project.

The chance to work together on something so positive was appreciated by everyone.

Suggestions for improvement focused on the timing (longer timelines, not coinciding with Christmas and New Year, etc.) and on involving more agencies in future endeavours.

All Working Group members said that they would encourage their agency to participate in both a repeat of this project and similar concepts in the future. Suggestions for similar projects included a Battle of the Bands, Multi-media projects (enabling expression through art, video, podcasts, etc.) and an extension of this project focusing more on the emotions of a young person's journey during care.



I like to play my drums when I can and play them when I am upset. I think I'll be getting lessons this year and would like to be able to play like the drummer from Bullet for my Valentine.

Kuyan

Themes and messages

Recognising, encouraging and processing feedback (particularly spontaneous feedback, or that which isn't presented in the form of direct feedback, as such) from young people about their experiences of out of home care is an area that many agencies look to approach with creativity and innovation. It can be a challenge to ask the right questions in the right way to solicit the kind of response that can inform policy and practice in a meaningful way.

The *As Eye See It* exhibition project provided young people with an unstructured, but focused and creative 'mission' to let us know what is important to them as young people experiencing the out of home care system.

Without prompting, many of the direct and indirect messages illustrated in both the words and pictures by young people as part of the *As Eye See It* exhibition correlate with the rights defined in the Charter. As such we have taken this opportunity to reflect on the messages from the perspective of the Charter and to see them as a form of feedback that tells us what the rights mean in real-life terms for those to whom they are applied.

1

To be safe and feel safe

"I have felt lost and scared on the inside."

We know that feeling and being safe are key to the healing process for children and young people who have experienced trauma and abuse. What we perhaps were not aware of is what constitutes safety for the young people who are experiencing out of home care.

A surprising number of participants indicated that pets and animals played a significant role in their feelings of safety, or even their feelings of calm and relaxation. One young person explained that "I like coming home to [my dog]. He makes me feel safer, having him there". Similarly one commented that

they "think that it is good for people to have dogs to protect them". Another felt it enabled them to feel less homesick when they are separated from their family.

Less surprising was the emphasis on a 'space' of their own or a place to go to take time out as key to feeling and being safe.

"I took a photo of my door because it was the only thing that I had in foster care that I could call my own. Behind the door was my sanctuary, the only place that I felt safe when everything went wrong."

Several participants noted that their room was a place they could go to relax and listen to music or entertain themselves. It was noted as a place that provided sanctuary – where they could be themselves. Others indicated that they had special places (a lake, for example) that provided the same sense of sanctuary, safety and connection to self.

"I am most at peace standing tall, alone, away from all others, surviving."

For some it was time alone and for others it was connection to trusted people that provided the key to feeling safe. Specific mention was made of siblings and carers or workers as playing a role in creating that safety.

Contrary to the reports and feedback the sector often hears or assumes, one participant made mention of the role of locks in residential units as playing a role in making them feel safe: "I don't mind everything being locked up because it means my things are safe."

Significantly one participant stated that their fear came from a lack of a voice – from not being heard.

Safety can be an abstract concept when it has been lacking in your life, but what is clear from the comments and photographs is that a chance to be heard, a place to call their own and connection

to people and pets are key to the security of young people experiencing out of home care. Furthermore, the fact that some of the comments surprised us (in regards to locks and pets) indicates that if we are to continue to maintain safe spaces for young people, we *must* come from an initial point of asking them what, in their world, makes them feel unsafe so that we can *work with them* to find the solutions that make them feel safe.

2

To stay healthy and well and go to a doctor, dentist or other professional for help when I need to

While none of the comments or photos created by young people indicated anything directly associated with visiting a health professional, some spoke about the things that keep them healthy, as well as the impact being in care has on their health.

It was noted that being in care can be a factor in making young people feel depressed sometimes. However, that was countered by the indication that “when you’re on top of things you feel really happy”, which suggests that it is important to try to understand what it is that will enable a young person to ‘feel on top of things’. This might, for example, be something from the selection of ideas that others put forward, such as involvement in sport (“It keeps me fit and healthy”) or access to healthy, nutritious food.

3

To be allowed to be a child and be treated with respect

“I want people to understand that a lot of us, under our cloaks, we can still be kids.”

Some mentioned their beauty routines, others their computer games, treasured toys (remote-control car, teddy bears, etc.) or their carer’s pets that they

play with. The meaning of being ‘a child’ seemed to vary from the behavioural to material possessions, indicating again that this is an area that should be explored with each child or young person on an individual basis.

“I want you to hear and know that even though a lot of bad things have happened to me, I’m still a human being, someone’s son and brother and nephew. I want to be treated like a normal kid and there is hope.”

One young woman indicated that while young people in care might be teenagers or put up a front, they crave the opportunity to just be a child, be comforted and cared for:

“Even as a teenage girl, I’m a small girl at heart who just needs comfort through the rough times.”

4

If I am an Aboriginal child, to feel proud and strong in my own culture

Although a number of Aboriginal young people participated in the project, few indicated anything that specifically helps and enables them to feel proud and strong in their culture.

The only specific mention was in regard to painting: “One of the photos I took was of some artwork and I like it because it looked like Aboriginal painting and craft work that my people make”.

It is unclear whether the absence of cultural indications reflects a broader lack of Indigenous cultural experiences and connections in the lives of Indigenous young people in out of home care, or, alternatively a positive balance of these experiences. Greater focus on cultural pride and strength among Aboriginal young people is clearly an area for development in future projects.

5**To have a say and be heard**

“We all express ourselves – some with anger, self-harm, quietness, body language, or in the photo, graffiti, which is common these days. Pay attention to our expressions and you will always know how we feel.”

In part, the strength of the photographs and accompanying words were an indication of the significance of opportunities to be heard for young people in care. Their willingness to offer insights into the things that are important to them is humbling. A reminder that projects like this should be valued not only as feedback mechanisms, but as an opportunity for young people to creatively explore their own needs.

Although there were few statements or images relating to how easy or hard it is to be heard, many of the participants made direct statements about what they hoped people would hear from their photography and messages. These ranged from wanting people outside the care system to know that “young people in care have a voice and need to be heard” to general observations such as the fact that being in care is good, but that they still miss their family. There were also inspirational messages for other young people in care:

“The point I want to get across is that life has its highs and lows and all we can do is make the most of what we’ve got. But at the end of the day I wouldn’t change my life for anything, it may be hard and I may struggle with a lot of things that come my way ... but the amazing people that you meet and the feeling of knowing there are people out there that take their own time to listen and to help is incredible. You also become much stronger and you have a lot more respect for not only yourself but others. Don’t dwell on the past and let it affect you, think back and reflect on how

much a better person you are and that you can make your future the best it can be. We may not be able to change our past but we can make our future what we want it to be.”

Other specific things that participants wanted people to hear included:

- That young people in care need to be treated more respectfully;
- That family is important to young people in care and that even the little reminders of family can be treasured;
- That friendships and the feeling of being “accepted and loved” has a significant impact on a young person in care;
- That there is hope, even when there has been trauma, abuse and a sense of hopelessness before.

“I want you to know that good things can happen, whether you’re in care or out of care ... the help from the placement that I’m currently staying in has helped me through it all.”

And for their peers, participants had these pieces of advice:

- Don’t run from your problems and issues – face them and fix them;
- Be strong and keep busy – “being in care is not always pleasant, but if you are strong enough you can pull through”;
- You will get out what you put in – if you’re supportive, you’ll be supported;
- Take action to stay safe – “... if your parents have an alcohol or drug problem and you don’t feel safe, do what I did by telling someone or call DHS”;
- Hold on to the things that you love – “... even though living in foster care can be awful, you can still have things that you love”.

One young person powerfully stated that they had felt voiceless when they were suffering abuse:

"I didn't have a voice, I screamed out and no one could help me. I was scared."

Again this, combined with the other comments, is both a strong message to other young people and to the broader sector, about ensuring young people have access to a system that supports them and hears them.

There were also several participants who wanted people viewing the exhibition to hear specific information about themselves which ranged from general comments on their age, character, passions and interests to the positive impact that their own journey in care has had on their lives.

And finally, one young person made a strong statement reflecting the importance of making sure, as a young person in care, that your voice is heard:

"I always felt that DHS workers were trying to ruin my life, but they were only trying to make it better, but I waz making it hard by not talking to them about my feelings towards everything. If you are a foster child and having a hard time in care, and have no one to talk to, give your worker a call to talk to."

6

To be provided with information

The only comments made, that connected to the idea of having access to and being provided with information about oneself, was in reference to knowing about family.

"My foster family took me overseas after my dad died and I met up with extended family whom I have kept in touch with via emails ... At my mother's funeral I met for the first time my two half brothers and half sister. I do not understand why DHS were never able

to find them when I was younger so I could have got to know them... It has helped me to know I have other extended family that care about me now. It's hard not having biological parents."

This vignette illustrates the importance of having access to information for young people who are seeking to build and understand their own identity.

7

To tell someone if I am unhappy

"I'm a person that hides my feelings from everyone. I love my life but during it I have suffered from depression, all becoz I never talked about my feelings to anyone."

To some extent responses to this section overlap with the section about having 'a worker who is there for me' since many of the references to trusted people were about workers and/or carers.

This right more directly refers to access to adequate complaints systems.

No participants made any specific reference to making complaints or having their grievances heard. Instead, some spoke about being able to talk to workers/carers about anything (see 9 – To have a worker who is there for me), or their pictures and words referred directly to things that upset or annoy them.

"Sometimes things can be scary and sometimes life is bad, but we (brothers) both just keep hope that everything will be OK."

Issues and frustrations included:

- Being moved from unit to unit and leaving friends;
- Feeling left out when others get to do more because they're older;



My time in Resi has been a rollercoaster, but an experience I will learn from.

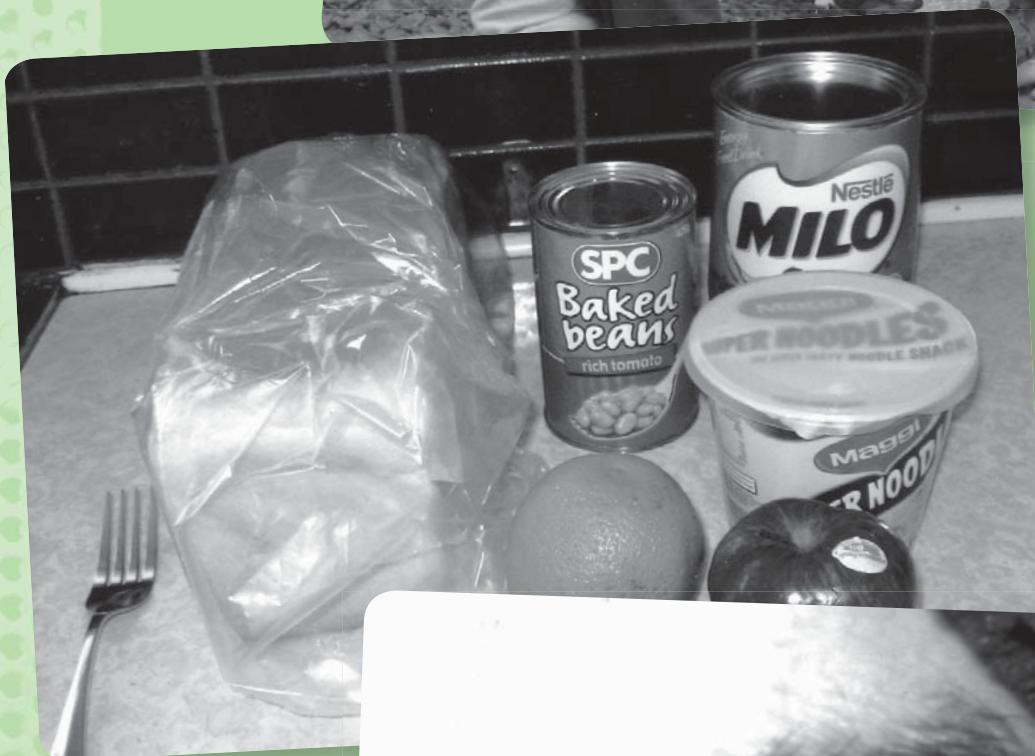
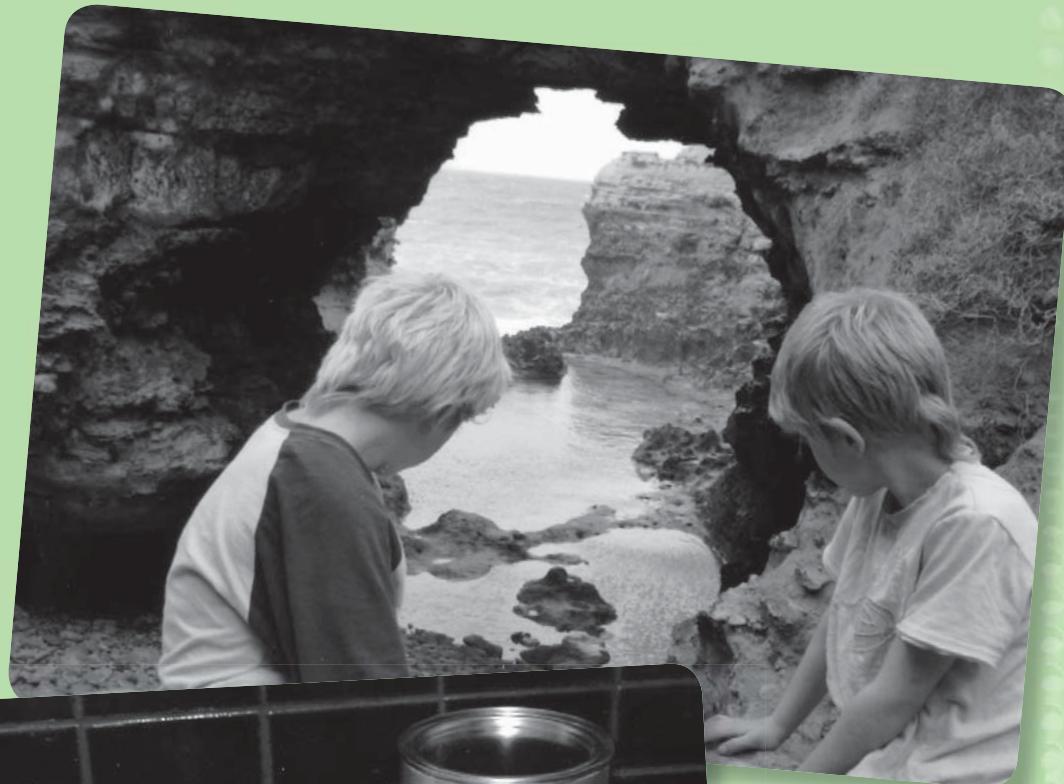
Alyssa

“Sure plates were thrown and fights were more than a common thing, but some of the best times I’ve had were while I was living [in resi]. In a twisted sense we were all a huge family. In that house I had a brother, a sister, at least three mums and a father. The bond that has grown between us is something that can never be broken. The staff always went out of their way to make sure that we were happy and safe. There were moments that we laughed and cried, fought and made up. It was no different to the outside, and no different from another child’s family. Maybe a little, but that made it unique. It’s a chapter in my life that I won’t forget. I won’t forget the people, or all the great times we had. Here’s to the past.”

Ashton

This picture is of my brother and I at the Great Ocean Road. I like it because it's good memory.

Jesse



The Unit always makes sure I never go hungry ...

Name withheld

I'm a person that hides my feelings from everyone. I love my life but during it I have suffered from depression all becoz I never talked about my feelings to anyone.

Roy



- Frequent changes of Case Manager;
- Disruptive influences in residential units – new residents causing placement breakdowns;
- Feeling isolated, ganged up on and picked on.

“I can feel confused and scared at times, but I have the safety of the carer/worker to help me out.”

8

To know information about me will only be shared in order to help people look after me

There were no references to privacy or confidentiality in regards to information. While some illustrated the value of having a private space of their own (bedroom doors, photographs of their bed or room, etc.) none made any mention of the sharing of information about them and/or their lives.

It is not unreasonable to say that many young people in the out of home care system have had their information shared with countless people as part of their journey. In some cases they have had to tell and re-tell their ‘story’ to various workers and agencies. With this in mind it is possible to imagine that many view control of their information as out of their hands.

An absence of reflection on this area could display either a lack of concern or an absence of understanding that it is their right to have their information protected.

9

To have a worker who is there for me

“I took a photo of a worker at the unit because this worker is the first worker, in my care experience, to be there when I have needed her and helped me to make each day better.”

Reflections on workers in the *As Eye See It* exhibition provide us with a detailed outline of what ‘being there’ for a young person actually means from the perspective of that young person themselves. Participants were broadly descriptive of what constitutes support and quality staff and carers, providing practical, emotional and material examples of how they have felt most supported and cared for.

From these descriptions we can deduce that for young people in care, a good worker or carer is someone who:

- **Is fun/funny** – can enjoy a laugh and a play with young people;
- **Gives advice and guidance** – when a young person feels frightened or confused, or when they’re not sure how to manage a situation;
- **Makes time** – to hang out, help out and understand;
- **Goes the extra mile** – is helpful and makes sure that young people are safe, happy and provided for;
- **Can rise above** – doesn’t hold a grudge and makes the effort to make up after a fight;
- **Is respectful** – to other staff and to young people;
- **Is inclusive** – makes the young person feel like part of a family;
- **Encourages and supports** – towards goals and dreams;
- **Takes an interest** – in the young people; their passions, their family, their problems;
- **Doesn’t judge** – gives young people the freedom to be themselves.

Some young people were able to articulate specific achievements that came as a result of a particular carer or worker, including sporting trophies, training opportunities and, significantly, repaired relationships with family members.

“No words could add up to the amount of support, encouragement that I have had since being in this program. They have given me something that would have taken years if I was to do it on my own. They gave me a new start in life, opened my eyes and made me realise that I could do anything that I put my mind to.”

There was an overwhelming message of gratitude among those who commented on the quality of the people who had cared for them. Some credit their carers or workers with enabling them to be better people or achieve their dreams in the future. Others stated their gratitude or just acknowledged that the presence of workers and carers means that there is support available, if and when it is needed.

“I am a sixteen year old boy living in Resi care. It’s not the life a kid should have to live, but it’s all we have got. It’s not the greatest feeling to have your parents turn their back on you, but at least we have carers to try and guide us in the right direction.”

10

To keep in contact with my family, friends and people and places that matter to me

“This year was the first time I spent Christmas with my mum since coming into care. I liked spending this time with my mum because she is my family and Christmas should be spent with family. I think all families should be able to be together at Christmas time.”

Connection to family comes up as a theme under many of these sections. It plays a role in making young people feel safe, being heard and having someone who is there for the young people. It is both a source of joy and of sadness for different young people.

“There are times when you are sad because it might be a family member’s birthday and you can’t see them. Every day I hope and wish that I will go home and one day I will.”

Some have felt supported to remain connected to, or build connections with, family, or expressed happiness at being kept together with a sibling for their care experience. Others feel like they don’t have enough access with one or more family members. In the case mentioned in an earlier section, a young person wrote about their experiences of discovering half-siblings and extended family members only after both of their parents had died, which left them wondering why they hadn’t had the support to do so earlier.

Similarly some commented on the benefits of significant friendships and spending time with friends while others commented on how hard it is to maintain friendships when they are moved around so much.

“My friends mean the world to me. They have always been there for me, no matter where I am or what the reason is, their support, friendship, trust, shoulder to cry on has pulled me through the hardest times, the worst and the greatest of times. I don’t know what I’d do without my friends.”

In the case of a newly arrived young person, friends have played an important role in their integration into Australia “[they] teach me stuff about Australia and the language that I didn’t know before (Aussie slang!)”.

In some cases, the tone of comments about lack of access to family and friends was one of frustration or anger, but overwhelmingly it was one of resignation and/or sadness.

“I don’t get to see my mum and dad very much anymore, because one day soon I am going to live with a new family. I would like to stay at my foster carer’s

house. I really miss my mum and dad which makes me cry lots sometimes.”

Pictures taken by the young people reflected family connections through objects associated with family members. Examples include telephones to symbolise how they stay in touch and scenery from places where they have spent time with family.

“The beach is important to me because it reminds me of when I used to spend time with my mum, she would take us swimming and we would have lots of fun down there in the water.”

Some of the ‘special places’ noted by young people were special because of their connection to family, others because they were places that they felt safe or relaxed (see 1 – To be safe and feel safe).

“My sister and I did get to see our mother, but not very often. Every time when the visits are over, my sister would cry. Being the eldest son, I thought that I had to be tough enough not to cry. And I waz, becoz I knew Mum would be proud of me.”

11

Careful thought being given to where I will live so I will have a home that feels like a home

Defining what constitutes a home for young people in out of home care is difficult when their previous experiences may have been marred by abuse and neglect. Some of the images and words created by young people in this project give us an idea of what ‘home’ means, but just as significantly some of them give us a strong indication of what ‘home’ is not.

Home is:

- Somewhere that has everything a child or young person needs like:
 - TVs and computers,

- lights and phones,
- a lounge room where the ‘family’ can sit together and watch TV,
- a pool that can be used all summer,
- a table where the ‘family’ can have breakfast and dinner together,
- a loved family pet,
- toys, swings, bikes and cars,
- a trampoline.

- Where a young person has a room – a space of their own;
- Where they have a sense of belonging;
- Where they can play a role in the household – helping out and being involved in activities;
- Where they are provided for – fed, clothed and loved;
- Where they are stable and able to stay for the long term;
- Where there are other children, young people and friends;
- Where they can relax and escape from ‘outside influences’.

“I live in a unit with my brother and my sister and I also live with another boy. It’s ok living in a group home, but it’s not like living with the ones you love the most, who is my mum and dad and my family.”

Home is **not**:

- Full of young people making trouble – this causes disruption and makes others feel unsafe;
- Full of locked doors and cupboards – it makes it feel like a prison instead of a home;
- Somewhere you are sent without choice or consultation – it’s important to young people to be part of the decision-making process;

- A place full of drugs – this makes it feel unsafe too;
- Somewhere where there are ‘staff’ doing ‘shifts’ – in a ‘normal household’ parents don’t work in shifts or come and go as much;
- Somewhere you are watched 24 hours a day – it feels strange to have your every phone call and conversation kept in a file.

One participant noted the vicious cycle that comes from the fact that clients dislike having locks on everything, but when they are disruptive and aggressive it reinforces the need to have locks to keep people safe.

“I don’t like living in residential care, its shit. It’s not my home, I don’t know where my home is, but that’s not it. I’d like my home to be living with friends.”

Many of the issues associated with who a child or young person would want to be placed with are covered to a certain extent in the discussion around staying connected with family and having a worker available. The focus of the themes in this section tended more towards whether a place can feel like home when it isn’t your home, in the traditional sense.

12

To have fun and do activities that I enjoy

“It is important that kids in foster care placements can have access to the things that they like and enjoy like other kids do.”

There were endless photographs of objects and items that are important to young people as part of an activity that they enjoy. The range of activities seemed to demonstrate that young people are being supported to access a huge variety of opportunities that they enjoy.

“Art shows my true feelings, because no matter how you feel, you can always draw or paint a picture and know no one will judge you.”

Photographs showed games consoles, remote control cars, ovens/cookers, paintings, animals/pets and much more. The comments mentioned camps, Lego, trips to the beach, martial arts, soccer, photography, reading, board games, golf, bike riding, motorbike riding, swimming, walking, going to the movies, boxing, holidays, horse riding, singing, trains, TV and videos, music, basketball, magic, travel, jet-boating, museum trips, poetry, roller-blading, netball, gardening, hockey, cloud-watching, eating donuts, skate-boarding

“I like resi care because I get to go out on activities and go camping with the staff. I get to go swimming and it makes being in care fun.”

13

To be able to take part in family traditions and be involved with cultural and religious groups that are important to me

Very little reference was made to family traditions or cultural values. While one participant noted that they are interested “in the spirit and in the mind”, they didn’t comment on whether they had been supported or hindered in this area.

One young person noted the role of school in supporting their Christian values and another wrote about the importance of “culturally designed clothing” as part of their culture. They noted that they wear this clothing to parties and events to show respect for their culture. In addition some mention was made of cultural dishes being prepared.

We could conclude that people are not being hindered in their pursuit of culturally significant practices since they have not made specific

comment on this. Equally it could be interpreted as an indication that there is still more to do in this area. Either way the absence of comment indicates that this is an area for further exploration in future projects.

14

To be provided with the best possible education and training

“One of the biggest things that has happened for me is to do with school. I nearly gave up in year 8 and then being in care with supportive people around me, I learnt how important it is to get an education. This year I start my VCE.”

- Although not mentioned a great deal by participants, those who did write about school indicated that their connection to school and their experiences there had played a significant role in shaping them.
- In one case, a young person felt that their experiences of bullying, expulsion and changing schools had made them stronger as a person. In another, the young person saw school as their major source of stability during their care experience. One participant made the simple statement that “while in care, I have been able to get to school every day”.
- Other participants have made a point of noting the resources that they have had access to as part of their care experience. These resources enabled them to maintain their school attendance (books, uniform, bus tickets) or have added value to their education (laptop).
- Given the age range of project participants it is perhaps significant that school is not a stronger theme in the photographs and words of participants. This is another area for further exploration in future projects.

15

To be able to develop life skills and grow up to become the best person I can

“Keep our chins up. So many people don’t have a home to go to, and we are provided one. To every kid in Resi, hold on. Life isn’t that bad. So make the most of what is now being offered to you. Take your second chance.”

Reflections from young people that linked to this section were full of optimism, pride and passion.

Some spoke about developing skills in cooking including cultural dishes and learning about a range of life-skills (first aid, drug and alcohol information, safe sex, home maintenance, car maintenance and self defence class). Others made general reference to how much they feel they’ve grown, how proud they are of their own achievements and how much strength they have gained to deal with whatever life may throw at them.

“I have been able to turn my life around and begin trusting people again.”

There was also mention of training and jobs that have set people on the trail of a career or a passion for the future.

“I feel I have grown so much in the last few months (as a person who can make decisions and now have goals, choices and dreams).”

16

Help in preparing myself to leave care and support after I leave care

“The photo of the car represents me moving forward as I am almost ready to leave care. I like to keep moving forward when I have left care.”

While few spoke specifically about the prospect of leaving care, some of the comments noted in the

previous section could be attributed to this one. Importantly, however, there was one participant who expressed some trepidation and anxiety when considering their transition into independence.

"Over the past few months I have been learning new experiences as I am moving into independent living... The experiences are new to me and it has overwhelmed me as a person."

While many are excited about their future, we know that this transition is a particularly tough one for young people leaving care.

As with other points above that have had less comment attached to them, this area requires further focused exploration.



Tanzanian flag of my birth country and the Australian flag of where I will live forever. This is the flag of my past and my future. The Tanzanian flag represents important parts of life in my country of origin. The Australian flag is really important because it is a great country, it is free and it is a democracy.

Magdelena

Additional messages

Alongside the themes that emerged in line with the Charter, participants expressed themselves in relation to a variety of other topics.

They spoke about their hopes and dreams and made general comments on issues they felt strongly about, or how they felt about their lives.

Below are some of those messages and comments.

Hopes and dreams

Statements about hopes and dreams ranged from hopes for their placement or care journey, dreams of a future family, activities and interests they want to pursue and career pathways they hope to follow.

Some spoke about hopes of reconciliation with their own family, while others painted a picture of a future with a family of their own – children, a partner and even pets.

“I still have hope that one day I will be with my family and that might not be in the next couple of weeks, even years, but I will never give up.”

Those who commented on the future of their current placement or care experience expressed a hope that they would be able to stay in the same placement for the long term. They hoped for stability and a chance to settle themselves or “get my life back on track”.

“When I grow up I want to be a hip-hop dance teacher, where I can teach all the kids all my deadly moves.”

Interests and future careers included self-defence classes, stone-masonry, childcare, vet, soccer player, hip-hop dance teacher and mechanic

among others. In some cases, they are already in training to pursue those careers and interests. In others, they explained that the desire to follow that particular path came from a positive childhood memory or a past involvement that they wanted to pick up again.

In all cases where the participants spoke about the future, their references were positive and hopeful.

“When I watch a sunset, even when I have had a shit day I know that the next day can only get better.”

Comments on care

In addition to the more specific comments in the sections above, some young people made some general comments about ‘Care’ as a concept or in reference to their own understanding of the system.

The comments ranged from indifference and resignation to positive and strong. A couple of respondents made the point that they felt happier in foster care. It made them feel settled, peaceful and “better”.

Conversely, one described their experience of residential care as “very busy and noisy, controlled by power”.

More generally one young person had this to say:

“Time in care is neither good or bad. It is not my choice to be in care, but it has a good effect on me. If I wasn’t there I would probably be on the streets. But it’s okay, I’m used to it. I have been in care since I was little.”

Conclusions

It cannot simply be assumed that the 76 young people who participated in **As Eye See It** were a truly representative group among the broader out of home care population.

In this project, agencies identified young people to participate on the basis that they lived in out of home care and were able to use a camera. It might be reasonable to assume that those considered 'hard to reach' may not have been well represented. Also, where young people are in chaotic or transient circumstances and manifesting the impact of trauma and abuse, the timelines for this first **As Eye See It** project may not have allowed for the time required to support and encourage less settled young people to participate.

With that in mind, this report should be seen as a strong beginning to a conversation that should continue into the future, assessing the effectiveness of the Charter and analysing how young people feel about their experiences of out of home care.

The information young participants shared gives a strong indication of the areas that require further knowledge and exploration. It presents some understanding of the challenges faced by the clients experiencing the out of home care system. As Eye See It also presented to policy-makers and direct service workers some concrete perspectives of children and young people in navigating and endeavouring to offer solutions that work for individuals in a system that necessarily caters for multiple needs of traumatised children at different stages of development.

The reflections on the Charter's progress in practice are, for the most part, very positive. However, the gaps and issues highlighted are significant. They are also not surprising – to a large extent the out of home care system is only too aware of its shortfalls. What we can gain from this project is a stark reminder of the importance of involving children and young people in the process of change. We cannot assume that we understand the needs of young people in out of home care or know what the

best solutions to issues may be without involving those who are the 'experts' of the experience in the conversation.

An unanticipated outcome of this project was the collaborative effort of so many agencies working together so harmoniously. Cross-sectoral projects like this can only benefit relationships between agencies and promote cohesion across the sector.

As Eye See It provided a group of young people with one opportunity to voice both the positive and the negative of their experience. It was not a survey, or a focus group. They were not required to expose themselves or their history publicly. They were not asked to provide measurements against the objectives and aims of 'corporate parents'.

As Eye See It gave them a simple task that they were able to complete anonymously and within their own parameters. The wealth of information they produced speaks volumes. The project provided the opportunity for children and young people to express themselves in 'non-traditional' ways. A fear or complaint or positive feedback won't always come by way of a direct question – **As Eye See It** shows that young people need a variety of ways in which to let us know what is going on for them.

While the exhibition and the launch itself was a hugely positive experience it is important to note the benefits that staff and young people gained from the process of working closely on this project. In a nutshell the opportunity highlighted the value of positive and constructive relationship building between children and the people who care for and work with them.

It is not too bold a statement to say that **As Eye See It** is an indication of the value of pro-active relationship building between staff, carers and young people in out of home care. Key to the success of this element of the project is the non-threatening nature of the activity which allows young people to approach and discuss specific issues in their lives in an indirect way. Given the

trauma and abuse that many of the young people involved have experienced, this non-intrusive approach, using a medium that they control, has proven invaluable.

Also invaluable is the lesson we learn about using every opportunity, whether it be through

planned opportunities like this, or everyday ordinary activities, to build trusting relationships, connectedness and skills for the ongoing lives of children in our care.



The photo of the duck in the lake looks peaceful and carefree, this is how I feel in home base care.

Darren



I am 16 years old. I have been in care since I was 13 and currently have been in the same placement since I gave birth to my son a year ago.

I want you to know that good things can happen, whether you're in care or out of care, having a baby has been the high light in my life and the help from the placement that I'm currently staying in has helped me through it all.

Paige

Recommendations

The following recommendations have emerged from a combination of the evaluation surveys and interpretation of the themes and messages found in the writings of the young people who participated in the **As Eye See It** project. They are divided into four sections:

- Positive aspects of the project for replication
- Areas for development
- Areas for future focus
- Initiatives resulting from this project

Positive aspects of the project for replication

Without hesitation it is recommended that **As Eye See It** 2009 be the first of many projects of its kind. The Working Group is already considering how to grow and develop the concept to benefit larger numbers of young people and to learn from this initial project.

It is clear there are many positives about the way in which this project was done that should be carried over into future endeavours. The following are specific recommendations for aspects that should be carried over to future 'incarnations':

1. Gift the cameras to participants

While this was not key to engaging participants, it was a positively received bonus. In view of the fact that funds are limited and the Working Group is not able to pay participants for their work, the camera is also a form of compensation for their engagement in the process.

2. Hold the opening exhibition in a prestigious public space and make the Launch Event a 'Big Deal'

The involvement of important guests and speakers such as the Child Safety Commissioner and significant Government representatives, as well as the venue being one

so publicly recognised and prestigious, sent a message to the young people that affirmed how much their time and stories are valued.

Areas for development

Clear themes also emerged regarding aspects of the project that require development:

1. More appropriate timelines for carrying out the project

For various reasons, the time for people to work with young people to develop their ideas and take their photographs fell during the Christmas and New Year period. For some people this made it hard to dedicate adequate time to the project. Future projects should allow for more appropriate timelines so people can dedicate adequate time to the project and so that young people are given ample time to fully express themselves and put in the effort they desire.

2. Improve process efficiency

2.2 Gain permissions earlier

Following the initial exhibition at the Atrium, requests were received to further display the young people's work and written permission was sought to retain their work for longer. Future projects should consider the potential for extended exhibition dates and should obtain appropriate permissions at the start of the project. This may also assist when trying to manage young people's expectations.

2.2 Earlier implementation of the evaluation process

The evaluation was undertaken some time after the launch, by which time many people had moved on to their next project. Future projects should be able to execute the evaluation process quicker given that an evaluation system has now been developed.

2.3 Clear instructions and tip sheets for participants and workers.

Information and instructional material were provided to the Working Group who met over several months regarding timelines, exhibition space, the process for submitting photographs and much more. The Working Group agreed that individual agencies would develop their own instructions for young people involved in the project. Future projects should develop clear instructions and possibly tip sheets for participants. Such information could include a clear description of the format of the photographs required, the timelines for production, how to complete the permissions form and where to deliver finished products. Workers could also be provided with examples of how people have engaged young people in the past, suggestions for ways to approach discussion with young people (in groups or individually), and ideas of places to take them to shoot photographs.

3. Hold the launch at a time that enables more young people to attend

The Working Group decided to hold the launch during the day to maximise potential for a crowd and to maximise opportunities for media coverage. Whilst some agencies with schools used the launch as an opportunity for a school excursion, some young people may not have been able to attend because of school commitments. Further consideration should be given as to whether future launches should be held outside of school hours, perhaps in school holidays, to ensure that the maximum numbers of young people are able to attend.

Areas for future focus

In analysing the outcomes of the project through the lens of the Charter it was noted that a handful

of the principles were not subject to comments or attention.

It is possible that this reflects that they are being adequately addressed and thus are not high in the minds of those who participated.

Alternatively it is possible that their absence infers the opposite and that these are, in fact, areas that require specific attention.

1. Use future, similar or ‘spin off’ projects to explore the application of the following principles of the Charter:

- If I am an Aboriginal child, to feel proud and strong in their own culture;
- To tell someone if I am unhappy;
- To know that information about me will only be shared in order to help people look after me;
- To be able to take part in family traditions and be able to learn about and be involved with cultural and religious groups that are important to me;
- To be provided with the best possible education and training.

It is also recognised that we cannot assume that the participant group included the voices of the most voiceless among young people in care.

2. Ensure future projects include strategies to enable participation of ‘hard to reach’ young people.

These might include those experiencing chaotic lifestyles associated with excessive alcohol and drug use, periods of homelessness (absconding, placement breakdown, etc.), among others.

Initiatives resulting from this project

There is a great deal of enthusiasm for the development of resources, further projects and ‘spin off’ initiatives as a result of *As Eye See It*.

The following are some of the ideas suggested or inferred by the input of participants, staff and carers.

1. Develop resources for staff, carers and policy-makers

It is opportune to integrate the findings of this report into the current partnership project between DHS, Berry Street, CREATE and VACCA to develop tools and mechanisms for 'Embedding the Charter in Practice'.

Based on the input of participants it might include:

- A DVD of the words and pictures from the exhibition;
- A resource for staff and carers to guide them in running a small-scale version of *As Eye See It* to stimulate discussion with the young people with whom they work;
- Opportunities for young people to speak about their experiences.

2. Explore the potential for 'spin off' projects using different mediums for expression, but with similar principles to *As Eye See It*

Suggestions focused around using filming and DVD as a medium; however, it would be appropriate to explore emerging technologies in general – blogs, website creation, social networking, film-making, digital story-telling, etc.

3. Develop an advocacy strategy based on the service gaps noted by young people

Young people made clear both the things in their worlds that make a positive difference and those that have a negative impact. Specifically, an advocacy strategy should include issues regarding:

- The things young people tell us makes a home 'homely'.
- The negative impact of multiple placements and changing workers.



I have anxiety attacks in relations to my new experiences and often enjoy going to the beach where I can gather my thoughts. The photo is of Black Rock beach, this beach is my favourite place to visit as it is quiet and calm.

Russell

Have you ever heard the expression ‘*What you give is what you get!*’? Well it is a bit like that being in care, you want to be at home with your family. There is really no place like home, so being in care is not where I’d like to be, but it is really only as bad as you make it.

I really like my carers and I have a lot of respect for them, they are always there for me and are always understanding.

“*What you give is what you get.*”

I have a lot of support around me and even though sometimes I make mistakes, everyone around me always helps to pick me up. I’m only a kid and I’m learning new things every day. I am taking each day as it comes and I know that one day I will return to my family.

Taylor



