From the Chair of the Committee

THE HONOURABLE STEVE BRACKS MP
PREMIER OF VICTORIA
1 TREASURY PLACE
MELBOURNE

Dear Premier,

I present to you the report of the Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee. The Committee is firmly of the view that Victoria has a golden opportunity to become a world leader in services and support for young children and their families, and that the new approach detailed in this report will deliver clear social and economic benefits for the State as a whole.

In accordance with our Terms of Reference, the Committee has made a series of recommendations covering services in Victoria for children aged from 0 to 8 years. The Committee has also articulated a vision and principles to guide future investment by the Victorian Government in services for young children and families.

The Committee believes there is compelling evidence for an overhaul of early years services in Victoria and has recommended a number of actions to ensure stronger leadership and a more focused, coordinated and integrated approach. In preparing its report, the Committee has met with major stakeholders and service providers, received and considered written submissions, undertaken consultations in collaboration with the Cities of Greater Geelong and Casey, and reviewed Australian and international research into developments in services for young children and families. The Secretariat to the Committee has prepared a number of detailed Background Papers in support of the Committee’s report and these are available through the Department of Premier and Cabinet website.

The members of the Committee thank you for the opportunity to explore these vitally important issues and look forward to working further with the Victorian Government to ensure that all Victorian children are given every possible chance to shine.

Lynne Haultain
CHAIR
PREMIER’S CHILDREN’S ADVISORY COMMITTEE
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In August 2003, the Premier of Victoria, Steve Bracks, announced the formation of the Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee (PCAC) to assist the government in ensuring that development and learning are optimised for all Victorian children from pregnancy through transition to school (0-8 years of age).

Chair
Lynne Haultain, currently the presenter of the Afternoon program on 774 ABC Melbourne, has a Bachelor of Laws and Jurisprudence and a Bachelor of Arts, and is a new mother juggling work and family responsibilities.

Members
Geraldine Atkinson is President of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI) and has a special interest in early childhood services for Aboriginal children.
Don Edgar is the former Director of the Australian Institute for Family Studies and an acknowledged expert in work and family balance issues.
Marilyn Fleer is Professor of Early Childhood Education and Development at Monash University and has extensive experience in preschool teacher training.
Sue Harper is the National President of OMEP (World Organisation for Early Childhood Education), co-author of the Kirby Report into pre-schools and former Director of the Lady Gowrie Childcare Centre in Carlton.
Rob Hauser is CEO of Yarra Ranges Shire Council and is responsible for a wide range of services, including children’s services.
Andrew McCallum is CEO of St Luke’s Anglicare, Bendigo, which provides diverse human services throughout North Central Victoria; he is also the President of ACOSS.
Frank Oberklaid is the Director of the Centre for Community Child Health, with a special interest in child development and paediatric issues.
Dorothy Scott is the Head of the Melbourne University School of Social Work and has a special interest in child protection and maternal and child health.
Cherie Titman is Principal, North Shore Primary School, responsible for delivering innovative programs in the Geelong area.
Lynne Wannan is the Chair of the Community Child Care Association and the Chair of the Adult Community and Further Education Board (ACFE). The Committee has been supported by a Secretariat provided by the Department of Premier and Cabinet.
In Australia, all levels of government, non-government organisations and the broader community provide children’s services. These services include maternal and child health services, preschools and childcare. Victoria invests more than $500 million in children’s services each year and has an established infrastructure that provides a high level of service.

The Government’s objective is to ensure that development and learning are optimised for all children from pregnancy through transition to school (0-8 years of age) wherever they live, play or are cared for. To assist the Government in this aim, the Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee was formed to advise on the relevant issues and make recommendations on the following:

1. THE PROVISION OF CHILDCARE FOR VICTORIAN FAMILIES

Although childcare is primarily a Commonwealth responsibility, it is of major importance to Victorian families. There has been a significant national debate on childcare issues such as adequacy, responsiveness and flexibility. To support the Victorian Government to engage with the Commonwealth, the Committee is asked to establish

- The childcare needs of Victorian families.
- The current arrangements.
- The key deficits to providing better outcomes for families.

2. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CHILDREN FIRST POLICY INITIATIVES

The Children First policy includes important commitments to maternal and child health services and Family and Children’s Centres. Having regard to the Committee’s findings and recommendations for references 3 and 4 below, provide recommendations on the implementation of these initiatives utilising a local area planning approach.

3. THE LINKAGES AND RELEVANT TRANSITIONS BETWEEN MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH SERVICES, CHILDCARE, PRESCHOOL AND EARLY SCHOOL YEARS

- What are the optimal linkages and relevant transitions between maternal and child health services, childcare, preschool and early years of school?
- How do these linkages and transitions currently operate?
- Identify best practice case studies.
- Provide recommendations to strengthen the linkages and transitions to deliver the best outcomes.

4. THE CONTEMPORARY FOCUS OF MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH AND PARENTING SERVICES FOR VICTORIAN FAMILIES

- What maternal and child health and parenting services support positive outcomes for children?
- What services are currently provided?
- Identify best practice case studies.
- Provide recommendations to support optimal outcomes.
The strong view of the Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee is that the issues raised by its terms of reference cannot be addressed without a comprehensive review and reorganisation of current services for young children and families. For this reason, the Committee has structured its report to clearly present a new statewide, whole-of-government framework for investing in children, rather than directly addressing the terms of reference in isolation.

The table on page 9 provides a guide for matching the Committee’s recommendations against its terms of reference.

Six principles for investment in children

The report’s recommendations are based on six principles developed by the Committee to guide future investment in the education, health and wellbeing of children.

PRINCIPLE 1
Investment in children should promote positive child development and learning through a universal system of support to ensure every Victorian child has the opportunity to access the services they need to advance their education, health and wellbeing.

PRINCIPLE 2
Within a universal framework, additional resources should be directed towards communities where outcomes for children are poor or where the risk factors for poor outcomes are high.

PRINCIPLE 3
Investment in children should focus on achieving defined outcomes for children as part of a clearly articulated whole-of-government and statewide policy for children.

PRINCIPLE 4
Services should be more integrated with each other, co-located physically where this meets local needs, and delivered within a coordinated, system-wide and multidisciplinary approach to service planning and development.

PRINCIPLE 5
Mechanisms should be developed to ensure policies, programs, activities and services are reviewed continually to make certain they are of the highest quality and are based on the best available evidence, not driven by historic processes and structures.

PRINCIPLE 6
Investment in children should ensure activities and services that are responsive to diverse local needs, promote community collaboration and give local communities a significant say in planning, developing and delivering services at the local level.
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VICTORIA'S CHILDREN ARE OUR GREATEST ASSET AND OUR BEST INVESTMENT FOR THE FUTURE.

Worldwide, the evidence is clear: investing in children delivers long-term social and economic benefits to individuals, families and communities. In a rapidly changing world, Victoria must make sure that our children are given every opportunity to achieve their potential, participate fully in community life and become active and engaged citizens.

Victoria has a strong history of supporting children and families. Across the State, many positive developments are taking place, as the Victorian Government, Local Government and many providers of children's services recognise that new approaches are needed to meet the changing nature of family and community life in the 21st century. This robust foundation gives Victoria a unique opportunity to develop a world class system of services for children.

The creation of the Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee signals the Victorian Government’s willingness to show leadership in making sure all Victorian children are given the best possible start in life. Through its actions in other areas, the Government has also demonstrated its understanding of the social and economic benefits of supporting Victorian families to achieve a better balance between the demands of work and family life.

But more needs to be done. The Committee has found that, while many families and children benefit from Victoria's high quality services, a major overhaul of the State’s family and children’s services is required to keep pace with changing family structures and work patterns, to address serious shortcomings within the existing system and to ensure that Victoria’s most disadvantaged children receive the support they need.

The Committee has found that a fundamental failing within the existing system of children’s services is the lack of a coherent statewide vision for children. Across government, no clearly defined position exists with sufficient seniority, power and resources to develop and deliver such a vision. Within existing administrative arrangements, there is no central point of responsibility for investing in children or for resourcing and coordinating services for young children and families. This absence of strong, sustained and focused leadership within government is a major impediment to achieving better outcomes for Victorian children.

The Committee believes there is compelling evidence for adopting a new approach to services for young children and families in Victoria and that such an approach should be based on:

- **Courageous and visionary leadership from government to deliver a universal system of services, ensuring all Victorian children are given the best possible start in life.**
- **A clear principle of shared responsibility in which all Victorians recognise the social and economic benefits of investing in children and accept that responsibility for the wellbeing of children is shared by parents, government and the wider community.**
- **A fully integrated, whole-of-government approach to services for children and families that better reflects the requirements of contemporary families and ensures that all Victorian children receive the support they need across the course of their early lives.**
- **A strong commitment to local control, accountability and responsibility for services for young children and families, recognising that children need both a family and a surrounding community that supports and advances their best interests.**

With leadership and the courage to cast aside old structures and processes, Victoria can develop a new approach to services for young children and families—creating a statewide, whole-of-government commitment to delivering better outcomes for children and generating strong community support for investing in children.

Changing longstanding systems and practices is difficult. But the Committee believes Victorians will embrace this opportunity with enthusiasm—and take on the exciting prospect of making sure all Victorian children are given the chance to fulfill their potential.
High quality, accessible services for children and families are a tradition in Victoria. Our early years services have undoubted strengths: very high participation rates in many services; strong community support, with high levels of volunteer involvement; committed and enthusiastic staff; and adaptation to local needs with a strong role for Local Government. The system is also taking important steps towards integration, has made significant gains in tackling the problems it was designed to address and has produced innovative and promising approaches.

However, current arrangements remain fragmented and poorly coordinated, out of touch with the contemporary needs of Victorian children and families, and need to give greater emphasis to positive programs that support parents in raising children.

The Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee has found that compelling reasons and evidence exist for the Victorian Government to adopt a new approach to early childhood services.

New research shows the benefits of investing in early childhood

Investing in children’s early years creates happier, healthier, better educated children—generating social and economic benefits for the entire community.

International research provides strong evidence for the best possible outcomes for children when they experience quality early childhood education and care alongside positive family and community experiences.

Strong community support for young children is particularly significant, with major reviews of childhood and family outcomes in recent years providing overwhelming evidence of the improved health, education and wellbeing of young children as a result of investment in pre-natal, postnatal, infant and early childhood services.

Environmental factors that affect a developing child and can have an impact on their life chances have been identified by international research: early stress (such as prenatal stress and post-natal maternal depression), parental use of drugs and alcohol; poor housing conditions; the lack of a stimulating environment; poor social networks; financial insecurity; and abuse and neglect. A recent Canadian investigation reveals that if children spend their early years in a compromised environment, they are at risk of acquiring major deficits in literacy, numeracy and academic achievement, as well as undermining their mental and physical health and social behaviour. Where these deficits lead to poor outcomes in adult life, they are likely to result in high economic and social costs to individuals, their families and the wider community.

Investing in education in children’s early years also bears positive and lasting results, with international studies consistently finding that the returns on investment in education are greatest for primary education. Longitudinal research in the United Kingdom and New Zealand has found that participation in early childhood education confers a lasting advantage in academic performance, and that the quality of early years education is also important.
A report by the Victorian Auditor-General in 2003 found that the Victorian Government’s investment in literacy in the early years of school had delivered literacy improvements for the lowest performing students and for those participating in targeted programs. Research also demonstrates that expenditure on remedial, ‘patch-up’ and crisis intervention programs can be substantially reduced by investment in positive, family-supportive programs in a child’s early years.

The needs of children and families are changing

Victorian families are more diverse, with family formation no longer following the traditional pattern of early marriage, early childbearing and mother-only child care and household duties. Young adults delay marriage and the birth of their first child and more children are born to older parents who are often in mid-career and wish to continue to work while taking on the responsibilities of raising children. Family life itself is less secure and predictable. Relationships are dissolved with less stigma than in the past, marital separation and divorce are more common, single parent families are increasing; and more children spend part of their early years with one parent only and with adults other than their birth parents.

The workforce participation of families is also changing, with fewer full-time jobs, less security of employment and income, and an increase in part-time and casual work. Jobless families and two-job families are both more common than in the past. These significant changes have placed many services under additional pressure, as they struggle to meet the needs of Victorian children and families within a framework based on historic structures and strategies, instead of the contemporary needs of families and the latest research and evidence.

Some outcomes for children are getting worse

While the pattern of child outcomes is complex and some of the evidence is uncertain, it appears that Victoria’s children are facing new problems, while other outcomes are improving. Strong progress has been made in addressing basic health issues, such as reducing the mortality of infants and young children and the incidence of vaccine-preventable diseases. However, some outcomes for children are worse than for previous generations. Children also face complex new problems arising from economic, demographic and social change.

- The prevalence of asthma in children is estimated to be around 16 per cent while the incidence of Type 1 diabetes is 18.6 per 100,000 children: both diseases increased over the decade 1991 to 2000. Obesity has also increased over the last decade, with 18 per cent of boys and 22 per cent of girls estimated to be overweight or obese.
- Other problems, such as behavioural and learning disorders, are increasingly recognised and reported, although it is difficult to be certain whether underlying rates are increasing. Among children aged 4 to 12 years, research indicates that 17 per cent of boys and 14.4 per cent of girls have emotional and/or behavioural problems.
- Education and health outcomes for children vary significantly between different geographic locations and according to the socio-economic status of families. Literacy outcomes are below average for children from Indigenous, non-English speaking and low socio-economic backgrounds.
• There is evidence of chronic neglect and abuse of children, although it is impossible to ascertain whether changes in child abuse notifications reflect changes in levels of abuse or levels of reporting. A recent analysis estimated that, based on current experience, around 19 per cent of children born in 2003 who grow up in Victoria will be the subject of a child abuse notification; 9 per cent will be the subject of an investigation for alleged abuse or neglect; and 4.5 per cent will be the subject of a substantiated case of child abuse or neglect during their childhood or adolescence.

• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in Victoria experience higher levels of disadvantage in many areas of life. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are significantly under represented in Commonwealth and State funded child care and early childhood services, and significantly over represented in the State’s statutory welfare system. Perinatal mortality rates for Indigenous children and the incidence of low birth weight are significantly higher than those for non-Indigenous children.

CHANGING PATTERNS OF WORK AND FAMILY LIFE

• There has been a significant increase in female labour force participation, from 37 per cent in 1971 to 55 per cent in 2001.

• 51.3 per cent of Australian mothers of children aged 2 years are in the workforce; rising to 70 per cent of mothers of 3 year olds.

• Part-time or casual workers have increased as a proportion of all employed persons from 23.1 per cent 1992 to 27.9 per cent in 2001

• In 2002, of Australian families with children aged 0 to 9 years:
  - 6.3 per cent were couple families where neither parent was employed: and
  - 11.3 per cent were one parent families where the parent was unemployed or not in the labour force.

OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN

• Perinatal death rates for Indigenous children in Victoria for the period 1996 to 2000 were 16.8 per 1000, compared to 10.7 per 1000 births for non-Indigenous children.

• 39.6 per cent of Indigenous Victorian children aged 24 to 27 months were fully immunised in 2002, compared to 89.7 per cent of non-Indigenous children.

• In Year 2 at school, 47 per cent of Victoria’s Indigenous children were rated ‘consolidating’ or lower in reading, compared to 25 per cent of non-Indigenous children.

• In 2001–02, Indigenous children in Victoria were almost eight times as likely as non-Indigenous children to be substantiated as experiencing abuse or neglect, and 14 times more likely to have spent some time in out of home care during the year.

SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES (2004), ABORIGINAL BEST START: STATUS REPORT, MELBOURNE.
Recognition of the importance of family and community

Children flourish when responsibility for their education, health and wellbeing is shared by parents, families and the wider community. Current research demonstrates the importance of the surrounding community in supporting the positive development and learning of children. While families are the most significant foundations for a child’s health, learning and social development, very few families can cope alone: they need to be connected to extended family members, friends, neighbours and the wider community. However, the Committee’s consultations revealed widespread concern that informal support networks for families may be declining, with many parents feeling they receive less support from extended families and neighbours than in the past.

While the definition of ‘community’ is broad—ranging from a particular geographic location to a group of people with shared interests or backgrounds—family life and the activities of children are a key to building stronger, more prosperous and more inclusive communities. This is particularly important for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, with research showing a clear link between outcomes for children and close connections between community services and the home and family life of children.

A child- and family-friendly community is responsive to all children. It has a range of services and supports that are universally accessible, while taking into account children with additional needs, such as those related to disability, low income or other disadvantaging factors. Any new developments within the community should take account of the impact they have on children and families.
THROUGH ITS CONSULTATIONS, THE COMMITTEE HAS IDENTIFIED FIVE CRITICAL AREAS FOR CHANGE WITHIN VICTORIA’S CURRENT SYSTEM FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES.

1. There is no strategic statewide focus on Victorian children

At present, there is no coordinated, whole-of-government focus by the Victorian Government on developing and supporting a sustainable system of services for children and families. Separate departmental ‘silos’ operate in a largely isolated and uncoordinated manner, leading to poor accountability measures, duplicated procedures and administrative difficulties for services on the ground.

The needs of vulnerable children and the provision of specific service types, such as kindergarten and Maternal and Child Health services, have driven the Victorian Government’s approach to children. In addition, Commonwealth-funded services have developed largely separately and in response to different priorities. There are no overarching policy goals for children and no coherent community-wide approach to services for young children and families. This has worked against the development of a system of services that is universal, responsive to contemporary needs and capable of providing a non-stigmatising entry point to appropriate early intervention and prevention programs.

2. Services have disparate objectives and no outcome measures

Across Victoria, children’s and family services are funded through disparate sources, delivered with different objectives in mind and often have little coordination or communication.

There is no consistent evidence-based approach to delivering services for children and families. Currently, services are accountable for the numbers of children they see, rather than what they achieve. A paucity of data on family and children’s needs makes it difficult to match services with needs and evaluate their effectiveness.

3. Services have disparate objectives and no outcome measures

These problems are compounded by the short term funding of various ‘pilot’ programs, reducing the capacity of services to develop and disseminate innovative practices and often resulting in the discontinuation of promising practices when funding to the program runs out.

The historical structure of the current arrangements—centralised, ‘top down’ and split into departmental and agency ‘silos’—fails to address these issues.

3. Children and families are not getting the support they need

Research shows that disadvantage is becoming more polarised and concentrated in specific localities, where services are not necessarily reaching the most vulnerable children and families. The wide variation in regional and neighbourhood family circumstances and outcomes also points to the need for more locally responsive services to match diverse community needs.

Services are also under increasing pressure, with many reporting long waiting lists, poor staff morale and growing difficulties in meeting specific requirements of families at an appropriate level of quality.
4. Services are not integrated, with poor links and transitions between services

Poor integration between services means that families often negotiate tortuous paths to locate and access the different support and services they need. Services are rarely holistic: many are stand-alone services, focusing on ‘one part’ of the child or ‘one aspect’ of the family. Families are often confused by the system, are unaware of available services and do not know how and when to access services.

Generally, services do not exchange information and limited formal relationships and links exist between services. This is inefficient for families, and can lead to children and families missing out on timely, appropriate support. It also raises practical difficulties for families and service providers where children attend several different services throughout the day.

Isolated and poorly integrated services also lead to a lack of professional support for workers and difficulties for workers in keeping up with best practice in their particular professional fields.

5. Services are often inaccessible

Many services are not delivered in ways that are accessible for families. Opening hours can be unsuitable, and programs can be inappropriate or inaccessible for particular groups within the community. In particular, culturally diverse communities, people with disabilities and families with low socio-economic status continue to miss out.

Many families also find travel between different services difficult to manage.
A new approach to services for young children and families in Victoria

In considering its recommendations for change, the Committee is aware of the wealth of research and experience in early childhood available in Victoria, other Australian States and overseas. In preparing its report to the Premier, the Committee and Secretariat has:

- met with major stakeholders and service providers;
- received and considered more than 70 written submissions;
- conducted consultations in collaboration with the Cities of Greater Geelong and Casey;
- visited services and sites of interest across Victoria; and
- reviewed Australian and international research and literature on the early years.

The Committee also acknowledges initiatives by the Victorian Government in children’s and family services in recent years. These include:

- the development of Municipal Early Years Plans;
- the release of the Blueprint for Government Schools;
- the Government’s Action Agenda for Work and Family Balance;
- the Future Directions for the Maternal and Child Health Service report by the department of Human Services and the Municipal Association of Victoria;
- the implementation of the Children First policy, including the creation of new multi-purpose Children’s Centres across the State; and
- reform in the field of child protection and a review of the Children and Young Persons Act.

The Committee strongly supports these initiatives, but believes the Government must go further if it is serious about improving outcomes for all Victorian children. Victoria needs to undertake a significant restructure and re-orientation of the way it delivers services to children in the early years of life. The Committee’s recommendations cover four key areas where action is required:

1. STRONG AND VISIONARY LEADERSHIP
2. MORE INTEGRATED SERVICES, WITH BETTER LINKS AND TRANSITIONS
3. GREATER LOCAL FLEXIBILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR SERVICES
4. IMPROVED EARLY YEARS SERVICES
ONE
Strong and visionary leadership

STRONG AND VISIONARY LEADERSHIP FROM GOVERNMENT IS VITAL TO BUILDING A UNIVERSAL SYSTEM OF SERVICES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AND GENERATING A SENSE OF SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR GIVING VICTORIAN CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE.

Around the world, strong community leadership is proving critical in promoting greater levels of investment in the early years of childhood and moving away from historic structures and processes towards an evidence-based approach to providing services to children and families. At present, Victoria lacks a central focal point for whole-of-government leadership around children. There is no strong and specific voice for children within government, no statewide strategy for improving the delivery of services to them and their families, and no formal mechanism for community or expert input into government policy on children.

The Committee's advice to the Premier is that these shortcomings could be addressed through the appointment of a Minister for Children, the creation of a new Office for Children and the development of a statewide Master Plan for Victorian Children.

Principles for investment in children

RECOMMENDATION 1
That the Victorian Government adopt and publicise clear principles to guide its investment in children.

The Committee has developed six principles to guide investment in Victoria's children. The Committee believes these principles should be used by the Victorian Government to set clear targets to achieve the best outcomes for all Victorian children and to plan, develop and evaluate services for children and families. The six principles are set out on page 8 of the report.

A Minister for Children

RECOMMENDATION 2
That a Minister for Children be appointed with clear accountability for improving outcomes for Victorian children.

The Committee has examined a number of options to address shortcomings within the current system and believes the immediate appointment of a Minister for Children is essential for delivering the strong leadership required to achieve better outcomes for Victorian children.

To act effectively across all areas of government activity with an impact on children, the Victorian Government needs the strong central point of coordination and accountability provided by a Minister for Children.

This appointment will also raise the community profile of issues affecting children and drive statewide policy for investing in children, as well as signalling the government's strong commitment to improving the wellbeing of children.

To be more than a merely symbolic gesture, the appointment of a new Minister for Children must be accompanied by a commitment to introduce new administrative arrangements for delivering services for young children and families (Recommendation 3) and the development of a statewide, whole-of-government Master Plan for Victorian Children (Recommendation 5).

The Committee also urges the Government to give the new ministerial portfolio senior status within Cabinet.

An Office for Children

RECOMMENDATION 3
That alongside the appointment of a Minister for Children, the Victorian Government take immediate steps to create an Office for Children to deliver a whole-of-government, integrated approach to investing in children.

The Committee's strong view is that outcomes for Victorian children cannot be improved substantially without a clear central point of responsibility, advocacy and planning for investment in children. The creation of a new ministerial portfolio for children must be accompanied by a significant restructure of existing administrative arrangements to deliver leadership, coordination and integration in planning and service delivery at a senior level.

The Committee believes the best way forward for Victoria is the creation of a separate Office for Children, with responsibility for services for children and families and a mandate to develop and deliver a whole-of-government approach to investing in children.
The Committee recommends that the responsibilities of the new Minister and Office for Children include:

- developing a Master Plan for Victorian Children (Recommendation 5), including setting broad outcomes for the education, health and wellbeing of Victorian children;
- setting priorities, broad targets, goals and accountability guidelines for services for young children and families;
- overseeing all funding for universal family and children's support services;
- overseeing the delivery of services for children with additional needs and child protection within a universal preventative framework;
- setting guidelines for Children's Resource Zones (Recommendation 12);
- continually monitoring state legislation and programs with an impact on Victorian children and assisting in the preparation of Children's Impact Statements (Recommendation 6);
- working in partnership with Local Government to ensure services for young children and families meet local needs; and
- liaising with the Australian Government on matters relevant to the wellbeing of Victorian children.

The head of the Office for Children should be at the level of Deputy Secretary or equivalent.

The Committee is aware of the challenges involved in creating a new Office for Children and does not underestimate the difficulties for government and service providers in undertaking these changes. However, the Committee believes the current administrative arrangements are out of date and fail to provide the leadership and coordination required to ensure the best outcomes and opportunities for all Victorian children. The Committee sees the creation of an Office for Children as essential to Victoria moving away from the entrenched service 'silos' of the existing system and developing a truly whole-of-government approach to investing in children.

A Victorian Children’s Council

RECOMMENDATION 4
That the Government appoint an expert Victorian Children's Council (VCC) to advise the Minister and Office for Children.

The Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee views access to expert advice as vitally important in driving strong government leadership for Victorian children. The Government should appoint a new permanent Victorian Children's Council to advise the Minister for Children on:

- overall policy directions for young children and families;
- international and national best practice for services for young children and families;
- the monitoring and evaluation of performance against statewide targets and outcomes;
- developments in national and international research and identifying areas where further research is needed; and
- emerging social trends and needs.

The VCC should be seen as a vehicle for frank dialogue about the performance of services for young children and families, and as a crucial resource for the Office for Children in planning and delivering children's services.

The VCC’s first tasks should include working with the Victorian Government to develop a Master Plan for Children (Recommendation 5) and working with Local Government to establish Children's Resource Zones (Recommendation 12). The VCC should also play a leading role in working with Victorian businesses to promote family-friendly workplaces and encourage the greater participation of businesses in building more family-friendly communities.

The VCC should also play a leading role in supporting ongoing consultation with the Victorian children services sector.

The Government should ensure the VCC has sufficient administrative support to fulfill its role.

A Master Plan for Victorian Children

RECOMMENDATION 5
That the Victorian Government develop a Master Plan for Victorian Children that is based on the six principles for investment in children and that identifies positive outcomes for the education, health and wellbeing of children and sets statewide targets and goals to achieve these outcomes.
A Master Plan for Victorian Children is a critical element in ensuring a more coordinated and integrated approach to early years services. The Master Plan should be implemented by the Minister for Children (Recommendation 2), with advice and input from the Victorian Children’s Council (Recommendation 4). It should be developed in close cooperation with Local Government, involve all services for children and be completed within 12 months. The Master Plan should articulate a vision for services for young children and families in Victoria. The Plan should reflect the six principles for investment in children outlined in this report and also include the following priorities for action.

- **A statewide learning framework for 0 to 8 year olds.** Victoria should have a statewide framework to support early childhood professionals in developing educational programs for young children (Recommendation 27).
- **A new approach to professional development.** Public investment in training should emphasise family-centred practice, the implications of research on child development and the capacity to work in multi-disciplinary teams and collaborative ways within communities.
- **Industrial arrangements that support these directions.** Early years services should be staffed by people who are appropriately qualified and remunerated for the tasks they are expected to perform.
- **Improving parental and community understanding of child development.** Parents should be kept up to date with the latest research and understanding of how children develop and how their positive development and learning can best be supported.
- **Greater public accountability and information.** The Victorian Government should issue regular public reports to enable Victorians to measure progress towards improving the education, health and wellbeing of children and assess the value of public investment in children.

### Children’s Impact Statements

**RECOMMENDATION 6**

That the Victorian Government develop a process to require the preparation of Children’s Impact Statements prior to the introduction of new policies, legislation and regulations.

Regulatory impact statements are designed to ensure decision-makers identify and assess the wider implications of legislation and regulations on the community. Children’s Impact Statements will compel policy makers to consider the impact of new policies, legislation and regulations on children and explain how any negative effects will be mitigated.

The Committee believes the introduction of Children’s Impact Statements will have several positive effects. It will promote an increased focus on children and families within government; give a much clearer picture of the impact of government policies on children and families; and enable the Victorian Government to take preventive action to ensure children are not affected adversely—and inadvertently—by proposed legislation.

The Committee’s preference is for a formal mechanism requiring government departments and agencies to prepare written statements assessing the impact on children of new policies, legislation and regulations.

### Stronger advocacy for integration and planning at the national level

**RECOMMENDATION 7**

That the Victorian Government argues for stronger collaborative arrangements with the Australian Government to support greater integration and planning of services for young children and families and ensure Victoria receives a fair share of funding for these services.

Developing a new model for the delivery of services for young children and families in Victoria will require the support of the national government.

The Victorian Government must ensure that the Australian Government understands Victoria’s approach to services for young children and families and recognises its potential benefits. Victoria must also work closely with the Australian Government to ensure that national policies and funding arrangements help position Victoria to develop a better planned, more integrated and whole-of-government approach.

Through the new Minister for Children, the Victorian Government should act as a forceful advocate for greater investment in children, an evidence-based approach to services for young children and families, and a stronger commitment to the integration of all services for young children and families, irrespective of who funds or delivers these services.
INCREASED INTEGRATION OF SERVICES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IS ESSENTIAL TO THE DELIVERY OF EFFECTIVE AND ACCESSIBLE SERVICES ON THE GROUND AND TO MAKING SURE VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES DO NOT MISS OUT ON THE SUPPORT THEY NEED.

The Committee has found that poor integration between services for young children and families is a significant failing within the current Victorian system. Integration ranges from improved links and information sharing to the complete merging of services. While not all services need to be fully integrated, the Committee is convinced that a much greater degree of coordination is required across Victoria’s services for young children and families.

The Committee recognises that accountability and funding for services is divided across three levels of government, but is firmly of the view that considerable scope exists to improve outcomes for Victorian children through greater coordination and integration at the State level.

Funding arrangements to promote integration

RECOMMENDATION 8
That the Victorian Government redesign its funding for services for young children and families to promote the integration and co-location of services and progressively move away from funding stand-alone, single-purpose services of any type.

Most Victorian families have multiple needs in caring for children. Currently, families are forced to negotiate a confusing maze of services and travel between services in different locations. This is wasteful of community and family resources and time. It may also lead to children missing out on services at vital stages in their lives.

The Committee strongly endorses the Government’s commitment to establish new multi-purpose Children’s Centres across the State, but notes that other opportunities also exist for the integration and co-location of services. Across Victoria, many government and community-owned sites and more than 1200 primary schools are used for only a part of each week: many are potential ‘children’s centres’ with little or no extra capital investment required.

The Committee is convinced that the days of stand-alone services for young children and families are over and that the Government should progressively move away from funding stand-alone services and provide strong incentives to encourage integration and co-location.

The Committee recognises that historic structures, traditional rivalries and professional boundaries may cause difficulties for many services in making the transition towards greater integration. Specific project funding should be provided to encourage these services to explore the benefits of integration and to help develop innovative approaches to integration.

This redesign of funding arrangements should be accompanied by other reforms to integrate child care and kindergarten services (Recommendations 23, 24 and 25).

RECOMMENDATION 9
That the Government explore arrangements that allow for the pooling of funds across services and programs within local areas and work in partnership with Local Government to fund demonstration ‘leading projects’ for the pooling of funds within selected local government areas.

The Committee believes a strong case can be made for changing current funding arrangements to allow for locally based services to pool their resources.

At present, many family and children’s services operate in isolation with little communication or cooperation with other services within their community. Establishing a process or program through which locally based services could pool funds, or seek funding for joint projects, would minimise duplication, improve accessibility, promote the co-location of services and stimulate more innovative, locally responsive solutions.

As many services have little experience of integration, the Victorian Government should fund ‘leading projects’ in selected local government areas to demonstrate best practice in pooling funding and evaluate the success of integrated services using pooled funding arrangements. At least one ‘leading project’ should be located in regional Victoria.
RECOMMENDATION 10
That the Government support service integration by reviewing existing legal and other requirements covering early childhood services to facilitate greater cooperation between services and remove unnecessary legal impediments to sharing information between services where appropriate.

Concerns about privacy, insurance requirements and legal responsibilities constrain many organisations in moving towards a more integrated approach to delivering services. Alongside the introduction of incentives and new funding arrangements to promote integration, the Victorian Government needs to address these concerns and review existing regulations to remove any unjustified legislative or regulatory impediments to integration.

Stronger links and transitions between services for young children and families and schools

RECOMMENDATION 11
That the Victorian Government actively promote primary schools as ‘core resource centres’ for children and families, ensure schools participate in Children’s Resource Zones (Recommendation 12) and encourage schools to be more responsive to local community needs and more integrated with local services for young children and families.

The Committee recognises that there are two key times at which all Victorian children come into contact with support services: birth and school entry. Between these two points, many children do not receive the support they need for optimal development, growth and learning. The better integration of schools with other services for young children and families is vital to identifying children who may need additional support prior to entering school and ensuring families receive the assistance they need once children are at school.

Schools should be supported to develop Early Years Transition Plans to maximise every child’s potential for success at school. Such plans would be developed in conjunction with parents and local services that have provided the child with support, education, child care and health care.
SERVICES FOR CHILDREN MUST BE MATCHED WITH THE NEEDS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES, PLANNED AND DEVELOPED WITH STRONG LOCAL INPUT AND SUPPORT, AND DELIVERED THROUGH A STRONG PARTNERSHIP WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

There is a strong international trend towards devolving to the local level key decisions about delivering support to young children and families. Early evaluations of initiatives such as Sure Start in the United Kingdom and Proposition 10 in California indicate that such devolution shows promise in improving outcomes for children and can be effective in increasing participation in services.\(^\text{14}\)

The complexity of modern life—and the diversity of families and communities—means that services must be responsive and flexible at the local level. Local communities must have a greater say in the way services are organised to meet their particular needs. Services that are uniform, one-size-fits-all or decided by a ‘top-down’ approach will struggle to meet the contemporary needs of children, families and communities.

Across Victoria, all Local Governments are preparing Municipal Early Years Plans for the delivery of services to young children. From the Committee's consultations, it is clear that these plans have been effective in promoting thinking at the local level about early years services. The Committee endorses this important step by the Victorian Government, but believes more can be done to link these plans with a statewide Master Plan for Victorian Children (Recommendation 5) and to accelerate a local area planning approach to services for young children and families.

Children’s Resource Zones

RECOMMENDATION 12
That the Victorian Government work with Local Government to establish local Children’s Resource Zones with the aim of actively engaging communities in planning services for children and families and devolving greater responsibility for services for young children and families to the local community level.

The Committee believes the creation of local Children’s Resource Zones (CRZs) offers an exciting opportunity to deliver flexible, effective, coordinated services on the ground, broaden the range of people taking an active interest in the wellbeing of children and help build communities that are supportive of young children and their families.

Under these new arrangements, Local Government will remain the lead planning agency for children’s services, but will be required to establish and support Children’s Resource Zones within each municipality to ensure local communities are actively engaged in planning and developing services for children.

The Committee suggests these Zones could be based on numbers of young children, natural geographic boundaries or clusters of services delivered to a particular community or population. CRZs will act as regional forums, debating and advising on how best to achieve these outcomes and targets.

The Victorian Government will negotiate with Local Governments in setting “tight” outcomes and targets for children in line with the statewide Master Plan for Victorian Children (Recommendation 5), but exercise ‘loose’ control in leaving it up to each local community to decide how best to achieve these outcomes and targets. These arrangements acknowledge the importance of the Government’s leadership in setting statewide standards, but recognise that local communities are best placed to assess local strengths, gaps, resources and needs.
Under these arrangements, Local Governments will be required to establish CRZs and to create mechanisms to ensure community engagement within each CRZ. These mechanisms may vary, but Local Governments will be required to ensure representation from a broad cross-section of interests, including non-government children’s and family services, parents, businesses, Maternal and Child Health nurses, early learning centres, primary schools and service clubs. Additional administrative support will be required to ensure the effective functioning of CRZs.

Local Governments will also be required to establish mechanisms that encourage the representation and participation of the most disadvantaged groups within a CRZ.

Activities for CRZs may include:

- advising Local Governments on the needs of children and families within the CRZ, gaps in existing local services and resources, priorities for action and the best means of addressing these needs, gaps and priorities;
- contributing to the development of long-term plans for the delivery of local services for children and families;
- running local forums to seek community views on the most appropriate local approach to achieving better outcomes for children within the CRZ;
- working with Local Governments to develop strategies to meet the needs of vulnerable families and children within the CRZ;
- advising Local Governments on possible innovative new programs and services to meet the unique needs of children and families within the CRZ;
- assisting in the development of strategies to publicise the full range of resources within each CRZ available for families with children;
- mobilising business and philanthropic support for children and families; and
- actively encouraging community support for children’s positive development and learning.

The Committee believes that a strong local area planning approach, such as CRZs, will improve outcomes for children. However, such an approach takes time to evolve: the Victorian Government must be prepared to make a long term commitment to the development and growth of CRZs.

A stronger role for Local Government

**RECOMMENDATION 13**

That the Victorian Government continue to work closely with Local Government to further develop, expand and strengthen Municipal Early Years Plans and take these plans into account when making planning and funding decisions.

Local Government in Victoria plays a strong role in developing, funding, providing and resourcing services for young children and families. The Committee's view is that Local Government should be closely involved in the development of a strong local planning approach to these services.

Municipal Early Years Plans provide an immediate opportunity to receive local input and assess local needs. Municipal Early Years Plans should be used by the Government in making planning and funding decisions for services for young children and families, developing Children's Resource Zones (Recommendation 12), establishing multi-disciplinary Children's Centres (Recommendation 8) and exploring new pooled funding arrangements (Recommendation 9).

**FIGURE 2: PROPOSED ADMINISTRATIVE AND CONSULTATIVE ARRANGEMENTS**

- **Children’s Resource Zones**
  - Families
  - Community
  - Service Providers
  - Business
  - Government
  **RECOMMENDATION 12**

- **Municipal Early Years Plans**
  **RECOMMENDATION 13**

- **Victorian Children’s Council**
  **RECOMMENDATION 4**

- **Minister for Children Office for Children Guided by Master Plan**
  **RECOMMENDATION 2, 3 & 5**
FOUR
Improved early years services

ACTION BY GOVERNMENT IS NEEDED TO ENSURE ALL VICTORIAN CHILDREN HAVE ACCESS IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THEIR LIVES TO HIGH QUALITY, AFFORDABLE SERVICES THAT PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT, AND THAT ARE RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN, PARENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES.

Statewide issues
A quality framework for services for young children

RECOMMENDATION 14
That the Victorian Government commission a full review of the regulations, legal requirements and professional qualifications covering all services for young children in Victoria with a view to establishing an exemplary quality framework for investment in early years services for children.

The Committee’s consultations revealed continuing concern about the quality of services for young children in Victoria.

The Committee notes that improving outcomes for Victorian children requires services of the highest quality, staffed by a skilled and motivated workforce. In addition, an appropriately qualified and remunerated workforce is the key to attracting and retaining high quality professional staff within the children’s and family services sector.

The Committee believes stronger efforts need to be made by all three levels of government, public and private sector service providers, professional associations and unions to drive and enforce a quality framework for services for young children and families in Victoria. As a first step, the Victorian Government should review current regulatory, legal and professional requirements with a view to incorporating a strong quality framework for services within the new Master Plan for Victorian Children (Recommendation 5).

The review should include an examination of:
- Victorian regulations and the Australian Government’s quality frameworks covering services for young children and their families;
- the best means of enforcing regulations, standards and quality across the sector;
- education and qualifications for staff working in the sector;
- industrial and workplace arrangements across the sector;
- the possibility of establishing a Registration Board for early childhood professionals; and
- the implications of a new quality framework for remuneration of staff and the funding of early years services.

The review should also incorporate the recommendations of the current examination of the Children and Young Persons Act 1989.

Regulations for Outside School Hours Care and Family Day Care

RECOMMENDATION 15
That the Victorian Government immediately develop regulations covering Outside School Hours Care and Family Day Care.

Quality of service is vitally important in all settings involving children. The Committee is concerned that Outside School Hours Care and Family Day Care in Victoria are not subject to formal regulation. While recognising the difficulties involved in regulating these services, the Committee notes that other Australian states have introduced, or are in the process of introducing, some form of regulations to cover them. The Victorian Government should acknowledge the importance of ensuring quality in these early years services and take immediate steps to develop and implement regulations for Outside School Hours Care and Family Day Care.
Engaging vulnerable families

RECOMMENDATION 16

That the Government give priority to developing new initiatives to engage vulnerable parents and families.

Establishing a universal system of support for children requires a much more focused effort to target children and families who have traditionally missed out on services.

The Committee’s consultations revealed widespread concern that families at risk of developing serious parenting difficulties may be missing out on support. Between the two points of almost universal participation in services—birth and school entry—some children and families may receive little or no support. Around one third of health issues identified by school nurses in Victorian Prep students have not been previously diagnosed, with the most common issues relating to vision, hearing, speech problems, behaviour, wetting and dental problems.15

Vulnerable families and families with complex needs often find accessing and negotiating services particularly difficult. Victoria’s early years services need to give priority to increasing the participation of the most vulnerable families and take active steps to engage these families. A high priority for Children’s Resource Zones (Recommendation 12) and Municipal Early Years Plans (Recommendation 13) should be to devise strategies to engage these families and meet their needs.

The Government should explore specific new initiatives to engage vulnerable families across all service types and through the development of more integrated services. For example, protocols and resources could be developed with adult services to ensure that parenting support is available for parents with a mental illness or substance abuse problems and that the wellbeing of children in these situations is taken into account and addressed.

Targeted resources should be directed not only towards vulnerable families and children, but also towards communities where disadvantage is entrenched or growing.

Improved education for the early childhood workforce

RECOMMENDATION 17

That the Government concentrate its investment in education and training on shared programs for professionals in different services, emphasising family-centred practice, the implications of current research on child development and the capacity and skills to work in multi-disciplinary teams.

A better educated workforce is essential for the delivery of high quality services for young children and families.

In Victoria in 2002, 53.4 per cent of primary contact staff in approved child care services had a relevant formal qualification.16 A further 16.5 per cent had no formal qualification, but had three or more years of relevant experience. In the same year, 54.9 per cent of Victorian child care workers had undertaken relevant in-service training in the previous 12 months, compared to the national average of 59.9 per cent.17 The Committee acknowledges that these figures are close to the national average and are consistent with existing regulations, but believes more can be done to boost the education and qualifications of the early childhood workforce.

Through the Victorian Qualifications Authority, the Government should work more closely with education and training providers, including tertiary institutions, to ensure programs reflect the importance of integrated and evidence-based service delivery.

Ongoing professional development is also critical to ensuring quality early years services. The Government should work with service providers, professional associations, unions and education and training providers to develop a systematic way of ensuring early years professionals keep up with developments in their fields.
Better data and research

RECOMMENDATION 18
That the Victorian Government support and resource the development of a coordinated statewide system of collating data on the education, health and wellbeing of Victorian children.

While some statistics about Victorian children are collected, the lack of coordination in collating and analysing available data—and applying the results of research to policy development and service delivery—inhibits the development of appropriate services to meet the needs of families and children. In addition, data are lacking in many areas.

A comprehensive ‘picture’ of the status of Victorian children will enable more productive and effective investment in early years services. As part of developing a new approach to collating data, the Government should also take action to ensure that evidence about outcomes—and not simply numbers of service users—is collected across all service types and used in a timely fashion to improve the delivery of services.

RECOMMENDATION 19
That the Victorian Government support and resource a new research agenda to guide its investment in children.

Up to date research can improve the effective delivery of services and help target vulnerable children and families. Through the Victorian Children’s Council (Recommendation 4)—and in consultation with academics, service providers and Local Government—the Government should develop a research agenda to guide its investment in children. The agenda should:

- identify, acknowledge and promote best practice in services for young children and families, and
- ensure new initiatives are evaluated, with the results used to inform future policy directions.

The new research agenda may be used by the Government to carry out its own internal research into children; directly fund research into children by external organisations; seek funding for research from external sources; and promote a particular direction for research by the providers of services for young children and families.

Improved information for parents and families

RECOMMENDATION 20
That the Victorian Government facilitate the development and distribution of community directories containing information on locally available children’s and family resources and encourage Local Governments and Children’s Resources Zones to explore innovative ways of conveying information to parents.

The Committee found widespread concern about the paucity of information available to parents to assist them in finding relevant services. Many professionals in the children’s and family services sector also appear unaware of other services operating in their local areas.

The Committee notes that the Child Health Record Book provided to every family and used mainly by the Maternal and Child Health service has led to improvements in this area; however, the book requires review to ensure its continuing relevance. Other, more recent initiatives could also be used to deliver information to parents, such as the Better Health Channel, which provides comprehensive information on a range of health services. 18

The Victorian Government should include the improved provision of information as a key outcome within its Master Plan for Victorian Children (Recommendation 5), but leave it up to Local Government or CRZs (Recommendation 12) to establish the best means of disseminating information within local communities.

More effort needs to be directed towards finding innovative ways to deliver information to parents. The Victorian Government should actively encourage Local Governments and CRZs to explore new and creative means of conveying information about services and child development to parents and the wider community. For example, greater use could be made of established centres, such as schools or libraries, workplaces and the Internet.
Greater support for fathers

**RECOMMENDATION 21**
That the Victorian Government develop a package of initiatives designed to support and resource Victorian fathers as active parents.

**RECOMMENDATION 22**
That the Victorian Government extend its encouragement of employers and workplaces to become more supportive of workers with family responsibilities, not only for women but more broadly for fathers as active parents.

The changing nature of families, the growing body of evidence on the importance of paternal—as well as maternal—involvement in the lives of young children and the more active engagement of many fathers in caring for children should be recognised in the delivery of services for children and parents.

Research shows that while men want to be more involved in caring for children, many feel that current services do not acknowledge or meet their needs.

The Committee believes much more can be done to provide practical support, education and information to fathers, with effort directed towards delivering support services in innovative ways and at locations and times that meet the needs of fathers.

The Victorian Government should work with Local Government to develop initiatives that focus on supporting fathers who are the primary carers of children, as well as encouraging a strong and active parenting role for fathers who may be struggling to balance work and family responsibilities and fathers who do not reside with their children.

The Government should also explore specific initiatives to encourage schools, employers and workplaces to be more supportive of fathers as active parents.

Greater support for grandparents

**RECOMMENDATION 23**
That, in conjunction with the new Victorian Children’s Council, the Victorian Government develop guidelines, practical resources and initiatives to provide grandparents who care for young children with information about child development and the full range of resources, activities and services that can assist them.

Many grandparents play an active role in caring for children, with care ranging from a few hours to several days a week. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that one in five Victorian children aged 0 to 8 years is cared for by grandparents for some time during an average week. However, very little is known about the type or extent of care being provided or the impact of these additional responsibilities on grandparents.

Grandparents caring for grandchildren on a part- or full-time basis may face a number of challenges, including varying degrees of isolation from their peers, family conflict and financial hardship. Their role can be made more difficult where they are elderly or frail, are also caring for their own elderly parents or are required to support their own children.

The Government should develop initiatives to support grandparents in their role as carers of young children, with a particular focus on grandparents who are socially isolated, frail and elderly, or whose first language is not English.

As part of a commitment to better data and research (Recommendations 18 and 19), the Government should ensure the collection of more information about the role of grandparents and the development of a better understanding of the extent and impact of grandparents caring for children.
Child care for Victorian families

Long Day Care, Family Day Care, Outside School Hours Care and Occasional Care services all operate in Victoria. In addition, the Victorian Government provides funding for kindergarten programs for children in the year before they commence school.

Victorian families use child care for many reasons: to enable parents to work, to have time away from children, to take part in community or personal activities and to foster children's development. As in the rest of Australia, the patterns of child care in Victoria are changing rapidly. Many children now attend child care before and after spending the day in kindergarten or school, and families increasingly use a mix of child care to support a range of needs.

While data about the use of child care services are readily available, accurate and comprehensive information about demand is currently not collected. However, the evidence suggests that in most parts of Victoria, demand exceeds available places for long day care and outside school hours care. Services across the State report few vacancies and constant requests for services. Families report confusion about the best options to meet their needs and a shortage of affordable and accessible services.

The Committee's consultations reveal that the current fragmented arrangements in childcare, preschool and kindergarten are not responsive to contemporary family needs.

Universal access to early learning prior to school

RECOMMENDATION 24
That the Victorian Government support and promote integrated early years services and continue to provide funding for a quality developmental program for children in the year prior to school.

RECOMMENDATION 25
That the Victorian Government no longer use the terms 'child care', 'pre-school' and 'kindergarten', replacing them with 'early learning centres' staffed by early years professionals.

RECOMMENDATION 26
That the funding differential between kindergarten programs delivered in child care facilities and those delivered in stand-alone settings be removed.

Young children develop, learn and play wherever they are: they do not recognise the difference between 'kindergarten', 'childcare' or 'pre-school'. The Committee believes that current arrangements put historical divisions and structures ahead of the best interests of Victoria's children.

Research suggests that all children will benefit from high quality developmental programs before attending school. For vulnerable and disadvantaged children, access to more than one year may prove particularly beneficial.

The Committee's view is that quality learning experiences need not be time limited for children and that current half-day and sessional kindergarten arrangements no longer fit with the lives of many Victorian families. Victoria would be well served in the long term by making the early learning experience more accessible.

As part of the drive towards more integrated services, the Victorian Government should move to abolish the distinction between child care and kindergarten.

The Government should aim to provide all Victorian children with access to a high quality program at an early learning centre in the year prior to school entry, with hours that match the needs of children and families. The Government should provide incentives for early learning centres to embrace full-day high quality programs.

At present, kindergarten programs delivered to children in long day care services attract a lower funding rate than programs delivered in stand-alone services. The Government should end this funding differential to encourage the development of multi-purpose centres where parents can access the full range of services and support they need.

The Committee recognises that these changes will require the cooperation of the Australian Government. In implementing these changes, the Victorian Government should seek to negotiate with the Australian Government to remove the barriers to integration created by different funding, quality assurance and policy systems.
A statewide early learning framework

RECOMMENDATION 27
That the Victorian Government develop a statewide framework to ensure the delivery of high quality educational programs for young children.

Internationally, curriculum innovation in early childhood education is drawing increasingly on theories of learning and development that emphasise the socio-cultural context in which development occurs. Recognising this, many countries now have in place some form of consistent framework to support early childhood teachers in their work with young children. Around Australia, most states and territories have a curriculum document of some kind (such as Contours of Learning in the ACT, Learning Essentials in Tasmania and the South Australian Curriculum Standards). Victoria does not have a state based framework to help early childhood professionals develop educational programs for their children. The Committee’s view is that such a framework should be developed to support early childhood professionals with program planning for children from 0 to 8. The framework should be linked with the Blueprint for Government Schools. The framework should be evidence-based and take into account both longitudinal research and recent curriculum development theory.20

Aligning local services with local needs

RECOMMENDATION 28
That the Victorian Government ensure that a key goal of local planning processes is aligning the hours of early learning centres with the demonstrated needs of children and families.

A common complaint of Victorian families is that the hours of children’s services do not match their needs or patterns of work. The Government should ensure Local Governments (through Municipal Early Years Plans) or CRZs determine the child care and early learning needs of local families and work to align the hours of local services to better meet those needs.

Advocacy for greater accessibility to services

RECOMMENDATION 29
That the Victorian Government advocate with the Australian Government to improve the accessibility and affordability of early learning services, and to develop better planning controls for Commonwealth funded services.

Access to child care was raised consistently as an issue during the Committee’s consultations. While considerable evidence exists about local shortages, there is little reliable information about unmet demand for child care. The 2002 ABS Child Care Survey found that more than 40,000 Victorian children required additional care. The reasons given by parents for not accessing additional child care services included cost (14 per cent), a lack of places (38 per cent) and a lack of centres in their local areas (13 per cent).21

The Victorian Government has a responsibility to support all Victorian families gain access to early years services and should continue to pressure the Australian Government to:

• remove the cap on funded places in outside school hours care and family day care in areas of identified high demand; and
• review the structure of the Child Care Benefit to ensure the affordability of services alongside the appropriate remuneration of early years professionals.

The absence of planning controls for Australian Government funded services also has an impact on access to child care. At present, a child care service can be set up in any area with no requirement to demonstrate need or demand. This can lead to some areas having more services than required, while others remain poorly resourced. The Victorian Government should urge the Australian Government to introduce national planning processes for child care services, including the identification of areas of priority need, to ensure a better distribution of services.

The Victorian Government should also urge the Australian Government to continue operational funding to ensure accessible, responsive services for Indigenous children and families.
Children First policy initiatives

The Victorian Government’s *Children First* plan provides a framework for delivering services for young children and families, including up to 30 new Children’s Centres, upgrading and integrating Maternal and Child Health services, additional early intervention services and new services in growing suburbs.

The Committee strongly endorses the direction of the *Children First* policy and recommends that the Master Plan for Victorian Children (Recommendation 5) build upon the *Children First* initiatives.

In addition to earlier recommendations for stronger leadership, more integrated services and greater responsiveness in services for young children and families, the Committee believes a number of actions are needed to improve the implementation of the *Children First* initiatives.

Funding for greater integration and co-location

**RECOMMENDATION 30**

That the Victorian Government provide further capital funding and other incentives for the co-location and integration of services for young children and families, building on the existing Children’s Centres program.

The Committee strongly supports the development of multi-purpose Children’s Centres and believes the Government should provide further capital funding for the development of additional or similar centres. The Committee notes that funding may not necessarily be required for new centres and may be directed towards supporting the co-location of services at existing under-utilised sites such as kindergartens and schools.

**RECOMMENDATION 31**

That the Victorian Government use its new Children’s Centres to promote other reforms proposed in this report, including pooled funding arrangements and best practice ‘leading projects’.

Children’s Centres offer an ideal opportunity for the testing and evaluation of new pooled funding arrangements, the adoption of a local area planning approach and better ways to deliver integrated services. The Committee strongly urges the Government to be bold in its approach to developing Children’s Centres and to encourage Centres to explore innovative methods of delivering services.

New approaches to delivering and funding services

**RECOMMENDATION 32**

That the Victorian Government promote new means of service delivery for young children and families by identifying and promoting innovative approaches in Victoria and resourcing creative and innovative ideas in Municipal Early Years Plans.

**RECOMMENDATION 33**

That the Victorian Government work with the corporate sector, philanthropic organisations and Local Government to explore more innovative approaches to delivering services for young children and families.

The Committee believes considerable scope exists for more innovative, imaginative and responsive arrangements for young children and families involving the corporate and philanthropic sectors.

The Victorian Government should work with a range of partners, including corporations, philanthropic trusts, small business, Local Governments and community organisations, to develop new models of meeting the needs of children and families. These could include outreach services into workplaces and shopping centres, partnerships with local businesses or mobile services.

The growing evidence of the importance of the wider community in improving outcomes for children should be used as the basis for these new approaches to generate broader support for young children and families.

The Committee’s view is that family-friendly workplaces are an integral part of child-and family-friendly communities and that employers share in the wider community responsibility to help parents manage the caring work of families and the duties of parenthood. The Victorian Government, Local Governments and CRZs should work closely with businesses to develop innovative initiatives that use workplaces to convey information to parents, link workplaces more closely with services for young children and families, and demonstrate leadership in work practices that recognise the needs of parents.

The Victorian Government should use the expertise of the Victorian Children’s Council (Recommendation 4), to explore these options more fully.
Maternal and Child Health and parenting services

Victoria’s Maternal and Child Health Service (MCHS) is a universal service for families with children, from birth to school age, and has long been regarded as one of the finest services of its kind in the world. The service has an extremely high initial participation rate, with around 96 per cent of Victorian families receiving a home visit following the birth of a child. While the participation rate declines as children grow older, the universal nature of the service gives it enormous potential in supporting the positive development and learning of Victorian children. As the first point of contact with the vast majority of Victorian families, the MCHS provides an excellent opportunity to identify vulnerable families and ensure they receive ongoing support.

In recent years, the MCHS service has broadened its role to include the provision of more intensive assistance to vulnerable families and a focus on maternal and family emotional wellbeing, as well as child health. The MCHS also facilitates parent groups as a means of strengthening social support and community cohesion. The Committee’s view is that such a shift in focus needs to be reinforced and extended.

Parenting services in Victoria include the Victorian Parenting Centre, Parentline, regional parenting services, family intervention services, Early Parenting Centres and Playgroups. Some services target families experiencing difficulty; others are available to all families.

The Committee strongly endorses the principles put forward in the recently released Future Directions for the Maternal and Child Health Service report, particularly those principles that relate to:

- universal access and participation for all children from birth to school age;
- a focus on prevention and early intervention;
- the provision of services that recognise a diversity of need;
- partnerships with communities;
- local planning, flexibility and collaboration; and
- support to deliver a quality service.

While endorsing the approach adopted in the Future Directions for the Maternal and Child Health Service report, the Committee believes further action is warranted to address concerns about the integration of the Maternal and Child Health Service with other services for young children and families and to develop new initiatives for parenting services that target vulnerable families, provide greater support to fathers and adopt a more family-centred approach to supporting parents.

The Committee’s recommendations for the Maternal and Child Health Service are designed to be consistent with the six principles for investment in children set out in Recommendation 1. In particular, improvements in the MCHS will come from closer integration with other services for young children and families.

Greater integration of the Maternal and Child Health Service

RECOMMENDATION 34
That the Victorian Government work in partnership with Local Government to better integrate the Maternal and Child Health Service with other services.

While preserving the universal nature of the MCHS (Recommendation 35), the Government should ensure it is better integrated with other services for young children and families. The Municipal Early Years Plans and CRZ processes should aim to build links between the MCHS and other services and support the MCHS in becoming more responsive to local and contemporary family needs. As a result, the Maternal and Child Health Service would:

- build closer links and shared perspectives with other early years professionals;
- better identify and understand local needs and adapt the location, hours and type of services provided to fit these needs; and
- increase participation by and improve outcomes for all groups in the community, with a focus on the most vulnerable children and families.

The Committee also endorses the proposed process set out in the Future Directions for the Maternal and Child Health Service report to achieve a closer partnership between State and Local Government in the future development of the Maternal and Child Health Service.
Maintaining the universal nature of the Maternal and Child Health Service

RECOMMENDATION 35
That the Victorian Government make a strong commitment to maintaining the universal nature of the Maternal and Child Health Service.

The universal nature of the Maternal and Child Health Service is a significant feature in the success of the service, giving families a non-stigmatising point of entry in seeking and receiving assistance with young children. Shifting resources away from this universal approach to one that targets vulnerable families will erode the success of the services and decrease its accessibility. The Committee believes that the focus on vulnerable families by the MCHS should not be at the expense of universal service delivery and that the Government should strongly support the MCHS to maintain its high participation rates. The Government should also explore a wider range of initiatives, beyond and/or in partnership with the MCHS, to target vulnerable families (Recommendation 16).

Extending MCHS services across the early years

RECOMMENDATION 36
That the Victorian Government work with Local Government to explore ways of extending maternal and child health services to older children.

At present, maternal and child health services are used largely by first time parents, primarily mothers, with children below two years of age. This focus means some families who require support may miss out. The Committee believes there is a need to ensure these services are accessible across a broader age range. However, the Committee notes that many families access other services, such as general practitioners, and that these services also need to be better integrated with the MCHS to ensure vulnerable children and families do not miss out on the full range of available support.

Priorities for funding parenting services

RECOMMENDATION 37
That the Victorian Government review all parenting services in Victoria and seek a stronger partnership with the Australian Government in delivering parenting services to ensure children and families have access to support that meets their needs.

Victoria's parenting services have not developed in a systematic manner. There is no clear rationale for the mix of services provided and increasing potential for duplication between the efforts of the Victorian and Australian Governments. Between birth and school entry, contact is lost with some children and families, leading to vulnerable families missing out on the support they need to ensure a child's positive development and learning during these important years. The Committee believes a review of parenting services is needed to articulate statewide outcomes and targets for parenting services and contribute these to the development of the Master Plan for Victorian Children (Recommendation 5). The review should clearly define the place of each parenting service across the early years of childhood, with the aim of delivering a continuum of support to parents. The review should identify priorities for:

- providing direct support to parents and ensuring effective investment in parenting services;
- the greater integration of parenting services with schools and other services for children; and
- resourcing and training of early years professionals and teachers to support parents; and
- removing areas of duplication between the MCHS and parenting services.

The Victorian Government should also build a stronger partnership with the Australian Government to reduce duplication and explore collaborative funding for parenting services.

The Committee is aware that the Government is undertaking a major reform of the child protection system and that improved family support is central to these reforms. The Committee believes the role of existing parenting services should be considered as part of this process.
Conclusion

The consultations and work carried out by the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee have revealed an array of services for young children and families that has many positive elements, but that is struggling to meet the demands and needs of many Victorian families.

Growing evidence of the major economic and social benefits of investing in the early years of a child's life presents Victoria with a significant opportunity to develop a more effective approach to early childhood. Strong leadership, better integration, greater local responsibility and a whole-of-government commitment to planning and delivering services for children and families will address many of the flaws in Victoria's current investment in children. These changes will also help build child- and family-friendly communities and a much stronger awareness of the importance of shared community responsibility for children's learning and development.

The Committee does not underestimate the difficulty of making these changes and recognises the historic barriers, boundaries and impediments to change. But the fact that outcomes for some Victorian children are getting worse is sufficient indication of the need for a fresh approach.

Changing family structures and working patterns also provide sound justification for re-examining our services, activities, information and resources for children and families.

The Committee's conviction is that Victoria stands at a crossroads with regard to young children and families. We can continue to invest in services that are increasingly out of touch with changing patterns of work and family life and that fall short of meeting the needs of vulnerable children and families. Or we can adopt a new approach and create a much more integrated and responsive system that will improve outcomes for all Victorian children.

The Committee believes that addressing its recommendations will create for Victoria a world leading system in early childhood. Adopting this exciting new approach will signify Victoria's determination to take a courageous step towards placing investment in children at the centre of our charter for government and at the heart of our community life—giving Victorian children the best start in life and every opportunity to fulfill their potential.
Background papers

The Committee has prepared a number of detailed Background Papers in support of its report and recommendations. The following background papers are available through the Department of Premier and Cabinet website. Go to http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au, click on Guidelines and Procedures, then Advisory Bodies and follow the links to the Committee website.

BACKGROUND PAPER 1: Term of Reference 1 – Child Care
BACKGROUND PAPER 2: Term of Reference 2 – The Children First Policy
BACKGROUND PAPER 3: Term of Reference 3 – Linkages and Transitions between Services
BACKGROUND PAPER 4: Term of Reference 4 – Maternal and Child Health and Parenting Services
BACKGROUND PAPER 5: Profile of Victoria’s Children and Families
BACKGROUND PAPER 6: Summary of Consultation Findings

Full lists of submissions received and consultations undertaken by the Committee are also available through the Committee website.

Further reading

In preparing its report, the Committee has considered a wide range of research from Australia and overseas. The Committee found the following list of publications particularly useful.


Future directions for the Victorian Maternal and Child Health Service, Department of Human Services, May 2004


Australia’s Children 2002, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Centre for Community Child Health, The Best Start Indicators Project, Department of Human Services, December 2001

A Head Start for Australia: An Early Years Framework, NSW Commission for Children and Young People and Commission for Children and Young People (Qld), March 2004

Centre for Community Child Health, Best Start—Effective Intervention Programs: Examples of Effective Interventions, Programs and Service Models, Department of Human Services, December 2001

Best Start Evidence Base Project, Best Start for Children: The Evidence Base Underlying Investment in the Early Years (children 0-8 years), Department of Human Services, December 2001


2002 Census of Child Care Services, Department of Family and Community Services, 2003

Press, F and Hayes, A (2000) Australian Background Report for the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood and Care, Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, Sydney, for the Australian Government


Sure Start website www.surestart.gov.uk
Endnotes


7 Centre for Community Child Health (2002) Best Start: Early Intervention Programs, Examples of Effective Interventions, Programs and Service Models, Department of Human Services, Melbourne; Karoly, L. (1998) Investing in Our Children, What We Know and Don’t Know About the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions, Rand Corporation, California


11 Centre for Community Child Health (2001) Best Start: The Evidence Base Underlying Investment in the Early Years, Department of Human Services, page 18


15 Primary School Nursing Program Data provided by the Department of Human Services


18 http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au


21 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Child Care Survey 2002: Victorian Data table 21. It is important to note that this data refers to children requiring more care, as distinct from the number of full-time places which could be used by more than one child.


23 DHS Administrative Data: http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au
