Putting Children First
… the next steps

December 2004
Putting Children First – the Next steps

In August 2003 I established a Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee to advise me on how the government can work better to improve the lives of Victoria’s children.

The Committee’s recommendations were received in September this year and have been carefully examined. I am pleased to now release the Government’s response to the PCAC report and announce some major changes to coordinate children’s services in Victoria under a new Minister and a new Office for Children.

I am also pleased to announce some important initiatives in the area of child safety. A new Child Safety Commissioner will be responsible for implementing a range of strengthened measures to protect vulnerable children. I am also releasing for public comment an Exposure Draft for legislation to expand the coverage of checks on the suitability of people working with children.

The Victorian Government’s vision for children is to provide them with the best possible start in life and to give parents the help they need to achieve this.

The Government has put in additional resources through the last two budgets to “put children first” by reforming Victoria’s early childhood services with the goal of delivering:

- The best possible health care from before birth through their early years – to ensure they are physically strong.
- The best developmental and family support to ensure they are socially capable.
- At least one full year of preschool prior to entry to primary school.

The objective is to ensure that all children are ‘school ready’ – that is ready to learn to the best of their ability - when they make the important transition from early learning to primary school. To achieve this we need to provide better and more accessible assistance to parents, especially for first time parents.

The Government is committed to building stronger families and stronger communities. This report is a major step forward for Victoria’s children and a strong foundation on which the Government can build.

I thank the Committee for their advice and look forward to working with interested organisations and individuals on the implementation of these decisions.

Steve Bracks
Premier of Victoria
THE PCAC REPORT

This document details the Victorian Government’s response to the report of the Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee (PCAC). It is designed to be read in conjunction with the Committee’s report, which is available at www.dpc.vic.gov.au.

This response provides an overview of the key changes to be made. Detailed responses to the Committee’s recommendations are set out in Attachment A.

The Government welcomes the report of the Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee and endorses its broad directions. Combined with the significant investments the Government has already made in Victoria’s children, the Committee’s report provides a strong foundation for further improvements and a valuable guide for policy making and service delivery.

This response details five major changes to the structure of Government to enable the coordinated delivery of services for children. It also describes the changes in services that families can expect to see as a result of these changes. There are also a set of principles which will be adopted to guide future policy development.

A NEW STRUCTURE FOR PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST

1. Minister for Children

A Minister for Children will be appointed to ensure children are given a higher priority across all Government policies, programs and activities. The Minister for Children will deliver a strong, consistent voice advocating for children across the whole of government, and as a senior member of Cabinet.

This appointment demonstrates the Government’s commitment to elevating children to the forefront of our policy and service delivery agenda. It also demonstrates the Government’s readiness to adopt new and innovative policies designed to make a real difference.

The first task for the Minister will be to implement the Government’s response to the PCAC report, including the development of a Statewide plan for Children’s services, build a closer working relationship with local government and coordinate Government action to ensure the safety of children in Victoria.

The Minister will also build a new relationship with the Federal Government to coordinate services between the two levels of Government and seek a fairer share of federal funds for children’s services for Victoria, especially for more childcare places – both Long Day Care and Outside School Hours Care.

Victoria has previously unsuccessfully sought to have childcare listed for COAG discussions. The Commonwealth has recently suggested national uniformity in the regulation of childcare and Victoria would welcome constructive discussions on these issues.
2. **Office for Children**

A single Office for Children will be established in the Department of Human Services to bring together the major services provided for children prior to school. This Office will have two main service delivery responsibilities – one dealing with universal children’s services for children prior to school entry, such as maternal and child health, childcare and kindergarten. The other will be responsibility for the special needs of vulnerable children in need of protection or care. Other functions will include planning, review and performance measurement.

It is intended that this structure will ensure a stronger policy focus is given to the development of all children, as recommended by PCAC. This will enable a consistent policy approach and a greater level of coordination and sharing of resources between closely related programs. For example childcare staff will have stronger links to early intervention programs and link their work to maternal and child health and other programs.

Strengthening links between universal services and child protection will support current reform directions and assist in creating a prevention and early intervention focus in the child protection system.

Universal early childhood development services that will be better coordinated and integrated through these new arrangements include:

- Maternal and Child Health
- Childcare
- Kindergarten education
- Local planning and coordination of services including Best Start
- Family and parenting services
- Primary school nursing services
- Early intervention programs for children with a disability

The Office for Children will also manage a range of programs to assist vulnerable children and provide for their needs in a more coordinated fashion. This will include:

- Child protection
- Juvenile justice
- Foster care and out-of-home care
- Innovation projects for children at risk
- Adoption and permanent care programs
- Indigenous initiatives

Other family support services will also be the responsibility of the Office.

This structure will ensure the needs of our most vulnerable children are addressed as effectively as possible. It will also ensure that the benefits of current reform initiatives will be realised quickly.
The new Office for Children will be charged with ensuring the administration of children's policies, programmes and services across government are delivered in consistent way. It will have strong links with the Ministers for Victorian Communities, Health, Community Services, Education and Training, and Local Government and their Departments.
NEW ARRANGEMENTS FOR CHILDREN: SUMMARY

Minister for Children

Premier

Victorian Children’s Council

Executive Director
Office for Children

Secretary Department of Human Services

Child Safety Commissioner

Advocate for Children in Care

Secretary Department of Justice

Working with Children Unit

= New Body
3. Victorian Children’s Council

A permanent Victorian Children’s Council will be established to provide high level policy advice to the Premier and the Minister for Children, as recommended by PCAC.

The Council will be made up of about nine recognised experts in children’s policies and services. They will be selected for their expertise and not as representatives of interest groups. Their mandate will be to advise government on all matters relating to children in Victoria. The Child Safety Commissioner will be a member of this Committee ex officio.

4. Children’s Services Coordination Board

A new interdepartmental Board will be established within Government to bring together key decision makers across Departments to ensure coordination of activities impacting on children.

The Children’s Services Coordination Board will consist of Secretaries from the Departments of Premier and Cabinet, Treasury and Finance, Human Services, Justice, Education and Training and Victorian Communities, as well as the Chief Commissioner for Police. The role of the Board will be to coordinate the efforts of different programs and consider how to best deal with cross portfolio issues. The Board will also review, on an annual basis, the outcomes of government actions related to children, especially the most vulnerable.

5. Child Safety Commissioner

The final element in the new structure is the establishment of a Child Safety Commissioner to provide accountability and undertake a number of important oversight roles in relation to child safety.

The Commissioner will be appointed by the Premier to oversee the delivery of services and ensure that the safety and protection of children is properly addressed. The main role of the Commissioner will be specified in legislation and will be to provide the Minister with advice and recommendations about specified children’s safety issues. For administrative and operational matters, the Commissioner will be responsible to the Secretary of the Department of Human Services. The Commissioner’s role will include:

- An education and advocacy role that complements the Working with Children Check by promoting child friendly and safe practices in the Victorian community (this would include education about the Working with Children Check in consultation with the Working with Children Check Unit in the Department of Justice).
- Monitoring compliance of the Working with Children Check Unit with its operating guidelines and procedures and suggesting improvements to those guidelines and procedures.
- Supporting and assisting the Victorian Child Death Review Committee in the exercise of its functions.
- Establishing and monitoring performance standards regarding children’s safety.

The Advocate for Children in Care will report to the Commissioner. The role of the Advocate will be described in new children’s legislation.

CHANGES TO POLICY AND SERVICES

6. Working with Children Check

The Government is releasing an exposure draft of legislation to establish a Working with Children Check in Victoria. This exposure draft is available at www.justice.vic.gov.au. The Working with Children Check will consolidate and expand existing checks to ensure that all people who work or volunteer with children undergo a check of their suitability for these roles. This check is an important part of the Government’s approach to protecting children. The Child Safety Commissioner will have an important role in educating the community about the check and assisting businesses and community organisations to create child friendly and safe workplaces. The Commissioner will also recommend guidelines for the operation of the check and monitor compliance with these guidelines.

7. Working closer with local Government

PCAC recommended local communities be given greater responsibility for identifying the needs of children and families and appropriate services to meet those needs in particular areas. This is consistent with the Government’s broad approach through the Department of Victorian Communities to transforming how government works with local communities. The Office for Children will work closely with DVC to develop approaches to supporting families at the local level.

The Government will give effect to this approach by strengthening the role of Municipal Early Years Plans and sharing best practice in this area through the Statewide Plan for Victoria’s Children. Greater local control over children’s services will be achieved through local councils, not another level of government bureaucracy.

8. Better Services for Parents and Children

The new Office for Children will be charged with ensuring that parents and children get the best possible support through the early years. PCAC has highlighted the critical role played by Maternal and Child Health Centres, child care centres and kindergartens in the early development of children. The government believes these services can be improved and made more accessible. By linking services at a local level, families will benefit from easier access to professional advice and confidence that their child will get the best possible care.
The Government supports the universal nature of the Maternal and Child Health Service, recognised by PCAC as one of the service’s great strengths. The Government has agreed on a *Future Directions for the Maternal and Child Health Service* document with the Municipal Association of Victoria, and is pleased that PCAC has endorsed the directions of this document. This strong partnership with local government provides the foundation for further improving the Maternal and Child Health Service to offer the support families need as part of a coordinated approach to children’s services.

Children of all ages need quality developmental experiences, whether they are in child care, kindergarten or at home. The Office for Children will look at how to bridge the current distinction between childcare and kindergarten so that children have maximum continuity and quality in their care, while having their developmental needs met and at the same time ensure parents have maximum flexibility in accessing services that most suit their work and family needs.

Less than half of Victoria’s existing childcare centres provide kindergarten programmes ensuring that children can move seamlessly from childcare to preschool in the same environment and at the same location. The Office for Children will examine how this option of onsite preschool can be extended to the majority of childcare centres in Victoria. The first step in achieving this goal will be consideration of the major barriers to integration identified by PCAC.

The Office for Children will play a pro-active role in identifying Victoria’s childcare needs. The Office will work to improve the supply of child care places in Victoria – assisting parents balance their family and work responsibilities with as little stress as possible.

The Office will identify where Victoria is missing out on childcare places for all types of care and provide assistance to communities applying to the Federal Government under Federal Government childcare programmes.

A smooth transition to school is important for all children. So is access to Outside School Hours Care for those families who need it. Victorian school premises are already used for a wide range of purposes, including the provision of Outside School Hours Care and in some cases co-location with preschools and child care providers. The Government’s $30m School Community Facilities Fund is part of its commitment to these arrangements. The Government will continue to support these arrangements, including by assisting communities to apply for Federal Government funding for Outside School Hours Care.

9. **Statewide Plan for Victoria’s Children**

The initial priority of the Minister for Children will be to develop a Statewide Plan for Victoria’s Children. This will be the first ever plan to cover services for children from the pre-natal period to school entry in Victoria, and a major step towards integrated planning for these services.
The Statewide Plan will build on the Municipal Early Years Plans prepared by all Victorian local governments. These plans provide valuable information on local needs and on the strategies local communities are adopting to meet them. The Statewide Plan will also build on work done by many different government departments in their areas of responsibility. These range from the *Strategic Framework for the Maternal and Child Health Service* to work recently undertaken on child protection and family support, to the *Action Agenda for Work and Family Balance*. The Statewide Plan will build on work undertaken by DHS on establishing priorities for gain in child health, development, learning and wellbeing and the role of existing child and family services in realising these gains.

The Statewide Plan will:

- Identify areas where improvements are needed and strategies to achieve this.
- Identify trends in the information collected for municipal early years plans.
- Identify best practice in local planning, community involvement, service delivery and the transition to school, and ways in which the State Government can support this.
- Identify gaps in current services and the best ways to fill these.
- Define outcomes for Victoria’s children and the best ways to measure these, including overall performance measures for the outcomes achieved for Victoria’s children.
- Identify research and evaluation priorities.

The Statewide Plan will identify best practice in a range of areas covered by the Committee’s recommendations that are best addressed at the local level and will promote improvement in these areas. These include information provision to families, ways of obtaining local input to planning and aligning service types, locations and hours to local needs.
Principles for Investment in Children

The Government has accepted the Committee’s recommended principles for investment in children as the basis for its further policy development and budget priority setting. These principles will guide the work of the Office for Children, as well as other Government decisions affecting children.

### The Committee’s Principles for Investment in Children

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<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Principle 1</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td><strong>Principle 2</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td><strong>Principle 3</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td><strong>Principle 4</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td><strong>Principle 5</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td><strong>Principle 6</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
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Previous Government investments in Children’s services

The Government does not have to start from scratch in implementing the Committee’s recommendations. Since 1999, the Government has invested in Victoria’s children, leading to major gains. Highlights include:

- Developing the *Future Directions for the Maternal and Child Health Service* strategic framework with the Municipal Association of Victoria, supported by additional funding for this service of $17m over four years from 2003-04.

- Increasing the role of local communities in early years services through Best Start local partnerships and through the introduction of Municipal Early Years Plans.

- Review of Victorian Paediatric Services within the Metropolitan Hospital Strategy, and additional funding for child hospital and other health services of $73m over four years from 2004-05.

- A 54.8% increase in the kindergarten budget since 1999-00, assisting participation rates to rise to the highest recorded.

- Investing over $4 billion in education and training, with a particular focus on the early years of schooling. This has allowed average class sizes in Years Prep to Two to be reduced from 24.3 students in 1999 to 21 in 2004. The proportion of year three students achieving national reading benchmarks increased from 89.1% in 1999 to 92% in 2002.

- Funding for 256 primary school welfare officers in schools that have the greatest needs.

- Major extensions in provision of dental care for children, particularly preschool children and those living in lower-income families.

- A renewed commitment to a community health policy and provision of multi-disciplinary child health programs in Community Health Services that bring together allied health, counselling, dental services, GPs and health promotion.

- Putting a particular emphasis on improving health and wellbeing of Indigenous children through the extension of Koori Maternity Services, the development and implementation of Aboriginal Best Start projects and the Indigenous Family Violence Strategy, and new approaches to enable extended family and respected Indigenous community leaders to participate in decisions made about the care and protection of the children when needed.
• Putting in place Family Support Innovations Projects, which have reduced child protection notifications in pilot areas by an average of 7.5 per cent, and are now being extended to over 29 local government areas across Victoria.

• Demonstrating a broader commitment to community building and empowerment through initiatives including 11 community capacity building initiatives, 10 community building demonstration projects and the Neighbourhood Renewal initiative.

The recommendations of the Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee provide a blueprint for building on and extending these commitments.

Detailed Responses to the Recommendations

The Attachment to this document provides detailed responses to all the Committee’s recommendations.

The Government accepts all these recommendations in principle.

The structural changes outlined above respond to the Committee’s recommendations: 1, 2, 3, 4 and 18.

The initial work plan of the Minister for Children will include action on the following Committee recommendations: 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 27, 28, 29 and 37.

Recommendations that the Government has adopted as guiding principles are: 11, 17, 22, 24, 25, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35 and 36.

Recommendations to which the Government will give further consideration are: 16, 21, 23, 26 and 30. Some of these recommendations will require funding to implement and will need to be considered through the normal budget process. Others propose substantial new initiatives that will require work on the details of implementation.

Taken together, the recommendations provide a substantial program of work that will lead to great improvements in the way the Victorian Government supports families with young children.
Conclusion: Improving Outcomes for Children and Families

By implementing the Committee’s recommendations, as outlined in this response, the Government will build on these achievements and further improve the level of support available to Victoria’s children and their families.

The main changes that families can expect to see are:
- Better access to quality learning and developmental programs, especially those delivered in child care settings.
- A wider range of supports for parents, including for vulnerable families.
- More coordinated and conveniently located children’s and family services.
- Greater opportunities for involvement in local planning.

The overall aim of these changes will be to improve children’s social, physical and emotional development, leading to an improvement in their readiness for school. Many of the difficulties faced by children of school age have their origins in the early years of life. A focus on children’s development and school readiness will provide a common aim for all those who work with young children and their families. It summarises our aspirations for Victoria’s children.
### Attachment A – Responses to Individual Recommendations

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<td>1. That the Victorian Government adopt and publicise clear principles to guide its investment in children.</td>
<td>The Government will adopt the principles proposed by the Committee to guide its future actions. Clear principles will assist in making future government actions consistent.</td>
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| 2. That a Minister for Children be appointed with clear accountability for improving outcomes for Victorian children. | A Minister for Children will be appointed. The Minister for Children will have responsibility for:  
  - the major universal services delivered to children in the years before school entry, including maternal and child health and kindergartens;  
  - child protection and juvenile justice;  
  - child safety;  
  - early intervention and family support;  
  - lead responsibility for whole-of-government children's policy, including the implementation of the Committee's recommendations; and  
  - engagement with the Federal and Local Governments on children's issues; |
| 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 Minister for Children will be supported by an Office for Children within the Department of Human Services. The Secretary of the Department of Human Services has been asked to develop detailed arrangements for creating this Office as a matter of urgency.  
To improve coordination within Government, the Government will establish a Children's Services Coordination Board. This will be an important mechanism to coordinate action and promote collaboration within government on children's issues. The Board will comprise Secretaries from the Departments of Premier and Cabinet, Treasury and Finance, Human Services, Justice, Education and Training and Victorian Communities, as well as the Chief Commissioner for Police. The role of the Board will be to review, on an annual basis, the outcomes of government actions related to children, especially the most vulnerable. The Board will also monitor administrative and governance arrangements to support coordination of government actions at a regional and local level. The Board will be given a legislative base through changes to |
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<td>That the Government appoint an expert Victorian Children’s Council (VCC) to advise the Minister and Office for Children.</td>
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| 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. | Developing a Statewide Plan for Victoria’s Children will be one of the first tasks of the new Minister for Children. This will be the first ever plan to cover services for children from the pre-natal period to school entry in Victoria, and a major step towards integrated planning for these services. The Statewide Plan will build on the Municipal Early Years Plans prepared by all Victorian local governments. These plans provide valuable information on local needs and on the strategies local communities are adopting to meet them. The plan will also build on work done by many different government departments in their areas of responsibility. These range from the *Strategic Framework for the Maternal and Child Health Service* to work recently undertaken on child protection and family support, and the *Action Agenda for Work and Family Balance*. The Statewide Plan will:  
- Identify areas where improvements are needed and strategies to achieve this.  
- Identify trends in the information collected for Municipal Early Years Plans.  
- Identify best practice in local planning, community involvement, service delivery and the transition to school, and ways in which the State Government can support this.  
- Identify gaps in current services and the best ways to fill these.  
- Define outcomes for Victoria’s children and the best ways to measure these, including overall performance measures for the outcomes achieved for Victoria’s children.  
- Identify research and evaluation priorities. |
<p>| 6 | That the Victorian Government develop a process to | The Minister for Children will investigate the best way to ensure that the impact |</p>
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<td>require the preparation of Children’s Impact Statements prior to the introduction of new policies, legislation and regulations.</td>
<td>on children is taken into account in all Cabinet decisions.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>The Victorian Government will seek a constructive partnership with the Federal Government to improve outcomes for Victoria’s children and families. The quality, accessibility and affordability of child care will be an immediate priority.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>The Government accepts the Committee’s principles for investment in children and will use these principles to guide its funding arrangements. While promoting integration and co-location as a general principle, the Government also accepts that in some areas, for some communities and for some service types, stand alone facilities will continue to have an important role.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>The Government is interested in improving arrangements for funding services for children and families. The Department of Human Services is currently assessing the value of a suite of flexible funding models. This project will provide much greater clarity on when and where flexible or pooled funding arrangements are likely to offer benefits to service users or efficiencies to service providers.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>The Government will review barriers to cooperation and information sharing with a view to removing any that are not justified by other considerations such as privacy. The Government is currently consulting on a set of propositions for reform of the service system supporting child safety and wellbeing. This includes consideration of the need for improved information flows and whether legislative change is required to permit these. In drafting new children’s legislation for introduction into the Parliament in 2005, to replace the <em>Children and Young Persons Act</em> and the <em>Community Services Act</em>, the Government is considering the balance between the importance of information flows in</td>
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| 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. | School facilities are currently major community resources, and schools continue to develop their capacity to support families. Best Start projects, now in place in 11 municipalities, engage local primary schools as well as local early years and other health and community services in partnerships focused on innovation and improvement. The government has also funded:  
- 256 welfare officers in primary schools to support students at risk;  
- support for the provision of outside school hours care on school premises, committing $500,000 in the 2004-05 Budget to assist providers in establishing new services; and  
- $30m over three years for the School Community Facilities Fund, which contributes funding to build facilities on school grounds for joint school-community use. |
<p>| 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. | Local governments are developing Municipal Early Years Plans and these will be the main vehicle for local planning and coordination. Where local governments implement Children’s Resource Zones, these will be supported. Future arrangements for Zones will be considered in the Statewide Plan for Victoria’s Children. Best Start demonstration projects have provided further information on how local planning and community engagement can work in Victoria’s early years services. Local governments are best placed to make decisions about how to plan for local areas within their boundaries. The Statewide Plan for Victoria’s Children will identify good practice in early years planning, including ways of involving local communities and ways that local governments can use this information in the next round of municipal early years plans. |
| 13 That the Victorian Government continue to work closely | The Government has been pleased to work with the Municipal Association of |</p>
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| 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. | Victoria (MAV) and local governments across the State to assist them to develop Municipal Early Years Plans. The first plans have been drawn up in 2004.

The Statewide Plan for Victoria’s Children will build on the municipal plans and look at ways to align Victorian Government actions and programs with them. This will support quality planning at the local level and increase the impact of the existing plans. |
| 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 Government will move to develop a unified quality framework for early years services in Victoria. The *Children’s Services Regulations 1998*, which cover child care centres and standalone kindergartens, have a ‘sunset’ clause and are due to expire in 2008. The Office for Children will develop a process for the review of these regulations and to reconsider quality assurance mechanisms more generally. |
| 15 That the Victorian Government immediately develop regulations covering Outside School Hours Care and Family Day Care. | The Government will implement regulations for Outside School Hours Care. The Government will also consider an appropriate regulatory regime for Family Day Care, recognising the unique nature of this sector and the important role of local government, which provides resource units in most of Victoria.

The development of a unified quality framework for all early childhood settings, including all forms of education and care (see Recommendation 14), will help shape these decisions. |
<p>| 16 That the Government give priority to developing new initiatives to engage vulnerable parents and families. | The Government will continue to include the most vulnerable families in early years services. The kindergarten fee subsidy and increased Education Maintenance Allowance will be continued. The Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Service, which provides extra support to the 10 per cent of families with new babies who require special attention over this period, whether because of maternal ill-health (including post-natal depression) or because other problems |</p>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>The Government will explore with tertiary education and training providers any opportunities to contribute to the promotion of shared core understandings as part of its efforts to widen professional development opportunities for early childhood professionals, particularly kindergarten teachers and staff. It will pursue opportunities for shared training, including where appropriate taking a leadership role with early childhood service providers to deliver integrated training, and will make these areas high priorities in allocating its funding.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>Data on the status of Victorian children is critical to developing and evaluating policies and programs. It is also important that the service system has clear and unifying goals to guide shared effort. The overall goal of the Office for Children will be to improve the social, emotional and cognitive development of children in Victoria. Part of the development of a Statewide Plan for Victoria’s Children will be to identify any appropriate outcome measures to reflect this goal. Systems to collect, analyse and distribute this data can then be designed.</td>
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<td>19 That the Victorian Government support and resource a new research agenda to guide its investment in children.</td>
<td>The Victorian Children’s Council will be asked to develop a detailed proposal for a research agenda that is consistent with the priorities identified in the Statewide Plan.</td>
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<td>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 councils and Children’s Resources Zones to explore innovative ways of conveying information to parents.</td>
<td>The Government supports this recommendation and will work with local governments to spread good practice across the State. The Statewide Plan for Victoria’s Children will also identify best practice in this and other areas.</td>
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<td>21 That the Victorian Government develop a package of initiatives designed to support and resource Victorian</td>
<td>Improved support for parents and carers, including fathers, will be a major priority of the Minister for Children. This will include consideration of the best</td>
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<td>fathers as active parents.</td>
<td>ways to support fathers specifically.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>The Government has developed and is currently implementing an <em>Action Agenda for Work and Family Balance</em>, which contains a wide range of strategies for making Victorian workplaces more family friendly. The Minister for Children will take a major role in the further implementation of this strategy.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>Grandparents play an important role in caring for children, sometimes as primary carers, but more commonly as major providers of informal child care, as well as supporting parents and children. As part of its consideration of the best ways to support parents and carers, the Government will investigate the capacity of current services to support grandparents and the need for any new initiatives in this area.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>The Government funds preschool programs for all four-year olds in Victoria. The participation rate is now the highest on record.</td>
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<td>The Government supports greater service integration between kindergartens and child care, and recognises the need for families to be able to access programs that meet their needs and fit with their other commitments. Integration is already promoted through capital funding announced in the 2003/04 Budget for Children’s Centres and new kindergartens, of $16m over three years. These facilities are required to include both child care and kindergarten programs.</td>
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<td>Future priorities will include reaching children who do not currently participate in kindergarten and expanding provision of kindergarten programs in child care settings.</td>
<td>The Government accepts the importance of all early childhood settings providing quality developmental experiences. The Government will encourage centres offering integrated developmental education programs to refer to themselves as ‘early learning centres’. This is part of a broader commitment to integration and matching services to child and family needs.</td>
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<td><strong>26</strong> That the funding differential between kindergarten programs delivered in child care facilities and those delivered in stand-alone settings be removed.</td>
<td>The Government accepts the need to promote programs that provide quality developmental experiences in child care settings as well as in stand alone kindergartens. The Government is currently reviewing funding for kindergartens and will implement more equitable funding arrangements as soon as possible.</td>
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<td><strong>27</strong> That the Victorian Government develop a statewide framework to ensure the delivery of high quality educational programs for young children.</td>
<td>Promoting quality developmental programs in all early childhood settings will be a major aim of the quality framework for the early years to be developed by the Office for Children. In 2003, the Department of Human Services supported the Australian Early Childhood Association to consult on the desirability and form of an early childhood curriculum for Victoria. The results of this project will inform discussion of the best ways to promote quality.</td>
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<td><strong>28</strong> 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 families.</td>
<td>Decisions on service hours need to be made by individual providers in the context of robust local planning processes and accurate information on local needs. The Statewide Plan for Victoria’s Children will identify best practice in this area and ways in which the State Government can work with providers and local governments to improve the match between service hours and family needs.</td>
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<td><strong>29</strong> 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.</td>
<td>The Victorian Government will continue to advocate strongly for the Federal Government to meet its responsibility to provide affordable, accessible and high quality child care for Victorian families, and for a more planned approach to service provision. Municipal Early Years Plans now provide a wealth of information about service needs and gaps across Victoria, and the Victorian Government will work with the Federal Government to include this in decision making.</td>
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<td><strong>30</strong> 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.</td>
<td>The Government is providing capital contributions totalling $8m over three years to 2005-06 to help local organisations or communities to establish multi-purpose Children’s Centres. A further $8m over three years is provided for new kindergartens that must also include other services. Further funding for these initiatives will be considered in future Budgets.</td>
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<td><strong>31</strong> That the Victorian Government use its new Children’s Centres to promote other reforms proposed in this report.</td>
<td>The role of funded Children’s Centres will be considered and supported in implementing the other recommendations in this report.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>This will be a major component of the Statewide Plan for Victoria's Children, which will draw on and promote best practice identified in municipal early years plans. Promotion of best practice will be an ongoing role of the Office for Children and the Victorian Children’s Council.</td>
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<td>That the Victorian Government work with the corporate sector, philanthropic organisations, the Australian Government and Local Governments to explore more innovative approaches to delivering services for young children and families.</td>
<td>Engaging these stakeholders at the local level will be promoted as part of the municipal early years planning process. At the statewide level, the Victorian Children’s Council will assist Government in engaging with these bodies.</td>
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<td>That the Victorian Government work in partnership with Local Government to better integrate the maternal and child health service with other services.</td>
<td>The Victorian Government works in partnership with Victorian local governments to deliver the Maternal and Child Health Service. Generally, local governments manage delivery and are the employer of nurses and other staff. The Department of Human Services directly provides the MCH Line telephone service. The goal of service integration will be pursued through work with Local Government and the Municipal Association of Victoria through implementation of the <em>Future Directions for the Maternal and Child Health Service</em> document and on further development of the Municipal Early Years Plans. Almost all of the Children's Centres being funded by the Government involve co-location of MCH nurses within a multi-service setting. An integrated system also requires the continuing adaptation and improvement of specialist child health and disability support services, so that families can gain access to additional information and more substantial support that they may need. The Government will continue to work to improve the availability of these supports in community health and Early Childhood Intervention Services.</td>
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<td>commitment to maintaining the universal nature of the Maternal and Child Health Service.</td>
<td>Service as one of its great assets. In improving the capacity of the service to engage all groups within the community, care must be taken to preserve its universal appeal.</td>
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<td>36 That the Victorian Government work with Local Government to explore ways of extending maternal and child health services to older children.</td>
<td>Increasing participation throughout the years prior to school is a priority under the <em>Future Directions for the Maternal and Child Health Service</em> strategy. The Victorian Government will continue to work with Local Governments to achieve this. The focus of this work will be on those families who could benefit most from this support, recognising that many families stop using this service as they feel more confident as parents. Evidence from Best Start demonstration projects and initiatives on outreach to families who would benefit from, but are not using, the service will be used to inform future practice.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>The Victorian Government provides a range of parenting information services and also funds Regional Parenting Services and the Victorian Parenting Council to early childhood and other education, health and community service professionals. Early Parenting Centres provide intensive support to families, particularly those with an infant, beyond that possible within the Maternal and Child Health Service. Related services are also provided for some parents through the child protection system, where there might otherwise be a risk to the child’s safety or wellbeing, or through family service organisations. The Government will review the range of parent information resources it currently makes available across early childhood to ensure that information is well-targeted, consistent, appropriate and authoritative. The range of parenting and family services will be considered as part of the</td>
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Statewide Plan for Victorian Children. More immediately, more intensive family and parenting supports will be further considered part of reform of the child protection system.

A constructive partnership with the Federal Government will be pursued in this area, as in others.