

CHILD PROTECTION

INVESTING IN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, NOT TEARING THEM APART

Supporting and strengthening families; and keeping children safe, happy and engaged in their homes, schools and neighbourhoods must be the goal of child protection.

For too long, governments have spent billions of dollars removing children at risk of harm, and grossly underfunded crucial early intervention services that prevent these risks from occurring.

The Greens have read the evidence; we have listened to families, the sector and the community; we support the recommendations of the landmark Tune report – and we are committed to a once in a generation investment in the future of the most vulnerable children in NSW.

THE GREENS WILL:

1. Coordinate resources from across government agencies including Family and Community Services, Education, Housing and Health to ensure coordinated and holistic support for children and families at risk.
2. Invest an additional \$300 million each year in early intervention services, to families with children at risk of harm because of poverty, domestic violence, inadequate housing or parental drug and alcohol addiction.
3. Increasing the age of leaving care to 21 to allow young people who need it to receive ongoing support and stay in a supportive family environment where their carers receive financial assistance.
4. Raise the age of criminal responsibility to 16 and provide appropriate supports to children and young people at risk of serious offending.
5. Deliver real self determination to Aboriginal families in child protection and ensure Aboriginal children are kept in community and on country.

6. Repeal the damaging forced adoptions laws rammed through the NSW Parliament in November 2018 and reverse the appalling rate at which Aboriginal children are removed from their families.

It's time the major parties realised that investing in families and children is every bit as important, if not more so, than investment in roads, railways and hospitals.

1. ESTABLISH A NSW FAMILY INVESTMENT COMMISSION WITH THE POWER TO DIRECT AND COORDINATE RESOURCES FROM ACROSS GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

All too often it is some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable families in our community that end up in the child protection system. A holistic, cross-government agency approach is essential to ensuring that children and families are given the support they need when they need it, and that they don't fall through the cracks between agencies.

The need for an independent commission was recognised by the landmark Tune report. This will deliver a whole of government approach that places children and families, rather than siloed government agencies, at the centre of service delivery. We need this because helping children means addressing often complex social issues including poverty, intergenerational trauma, family violence and access to affordable housing that cut across existing government services.

This means coordinating services such as providing a safe refuge together with access to counselling for women with children experiencing domestic violence and at the same time supporting their children in school and with counselling if needed. This will stop women with families from having to make the

choice between remaining in an unsafe home or becoming homeless – all of which are very real reasons for having your children removed.

By establishing a NSW Family Investment Commission the Greens will ensure that government agencies such as Family and Community Services, Education, Housing and Health communicate transparently and keep track of families that have come into contact with the system or children that might be at risk of harm.

2. INVEST AN ADDITIONAL \$300 MILLION EACH YEAR IN EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES

Early intervention services are immeasurably rewarding. All the evidence shows that by successfully investing in early intervention we can keep families together and build resilient communities.

The current child protection system is overwhelmingly crisis-focused and this is failing our most vulnerable children of families. This crisis won't be fixed by a few extra case workers – it needs a fundamental change in focus on early intervention. Of the \$1.9 billion child protection budget, just 17% is directed to early intervention support services, while the rest goes to crisis-based, band-aid solutions that all too often see families ripped apart and children placed in the out of home care system for life.

It doesn't need to be this way. The Greens are committed to implementing what all of the experts and best evidence says. We will direct \$300 million of additional funding each year to families with children at risk of harm because of poverty, domestic violence, inadequate housing or parental drug and alcohol addiction.

This means investing in practical solutions.

They can be as simple as providing breakfast to kids at school or giving respite care to parents with high needs children so that they have support before the family breaks down. It's about ensuring that a vulnerable young family with a new baby receives a generous baby care package and gets regular visits from the district nurse, or that parents with a history of substance abuse have easy access to counselling and rehabilitation services.

Done well, investment in early intervention services can become a virtuous funding cycle. Once this support begins to work and keep more children in safe homes, existing resources can be switched from crisis management to effective early intervention.

3. INCREASING THE AGE OF LEAVING CARE TO 21

Right now when a young person in the child protection system turns 18 their support is almost entirely cut off. If they're lucky they'll continue to receive some basic assistance when it comes to their housing, employment, education or health. Foster carers often can't afford to keep young people in their care once they turn 18 because government subsidies are suddenly cut off.

Life can be hard enough when you turn 18. You're often finishing up your last year of high school, are unlikely to have steady employment and are making big decisions about the future. Imagine doing all of this without the benefit of a secure home, parental guidance, financial support and having experienced years of trauma.

After they leave the care system, too many young people find themselves sleeping rough on the street, unemployed, in contact with the criminal justice system or becoming a new

parent and struggling with the responsibility.

The Greens believe that government has an obligation and duty of care to young people leaving care. By increasing the age of leaving care from 18 to 21 we will ensure that young people receive ongoing support and care that continues well into young adulthood if they choose this.

The Greens will also extend funding to foster care families so that where possible young people can stay in a supportive family environment, and their carers continue to receive financial assistance.

This investment in vulnerable young people is an investment in our future that will see huge long term savings in areas like homelessness services, mental health services, unemployment welfare and criminal justice.

4. RAISE THE AGE OF CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY TO 16

The age of criminal responsibility in NSW is 10 years old. This means that children as young as 10 can be locked up.

Every year around 600 children under the age of 14 are incarcerated in Australia. Over half of these children are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Over 85% of children aged 10-11 under custodial and community supervision are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

There is no question that at the age of 10 to 15 young people's brains are still developing, their concepts of criminal responsibility and their understanding of the full consequences of their actions are only partially formed. It is wrong in these circumstances to treat their behaviour as criminal.

Children who currently enter the criminal justice system and juvenile detention are overwhelmingly from backgrounds of structural disadvantage and suffering often multiple mental health conditions. These children should not be treated as criminals, but rather as children in need of care, support and a fresh direction in life.

5. DELIVER REAL SELF DETERMINATION TO ABORIGINAL FAMILIES IN CHILD PROTECTION

Despite the landmark Bringing Them Home Report and the National Apology, more Aboriginal children are in out-of-home care than ever before. With Aboriginal children being more than 10 times more likely to be removed by the current system than non-Aboriginal children, the current system is little more than a continuation of the Stolen Generations. This is a national crisis that continues to tear First Nations children from their families, from their culture and from their country.

Aboriginal self-determination is the answer to this crisis. The Greens are committed to ensuring that it is Aboriginal families, elders and services who are resourced and empowered to make the key decisions about their children. Preventative support measures and culturally appropriate early intervention services must be prioritised.

The Greens know that trauma is intergenerational and ongoing with the stolen generation continuing today. Aboriginal people with the collective wisdom of 60,000 years of continuous culture and the collective wisdom of their grandmothers, elders and parents know how to care for their kids better than forced removals and institutionalisation.

6. REPEAL THE DAMAGING FORCED ADOPTIONS LAW

In November 2018 the Coalition rammed through Parliament laws that make it possible for children to be adopted without consent from their parents. These laws will make child removals worse than ever and will overwhelmingly affect Aboriginal children. Aboriginal children are already ten times more likely to be removed from their families, and these laws would make it even more difficult for them to be reunited with their families, their culture and their country.

Almost every single welfare agency, Aboriginal organisation, survivor of past failed removal policies and legal body has said that these laws take us backwards. There are more than 800 Aboriginal children in NSW currently under care orders that could be affected by these laws. 40% of all children in out-of-home care are Aboriginal. There is no question that these laws will target Aboriginal children.

The Greens are committed to repealing these abhorrent forced removal laws in the first 100 days of the new parliament after the state election.