

STAND UP FOR OUR RIGHTS

Evaluation Report

AUGUST 2025

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands on which this report was written, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong Peoples of the Kulin Nation. I extend this acknowledgement to all First Nations Peoples of the lands on which the Stand Up For Our Rights project operates. I pay my respects to their Ancestors and Elders past and present and acknowledge sovereignty has never been ceded.

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Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Contents	iii
Acronyms and abbreviations	iv
1 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Project description	1
1.2 Evaluation.....	2
2 Findings.....	5
2.1 Who was assisted by the SUFOR Project and how?.....	5
2.2 What changes did the Project produce for young people?	11
2.3 What difference has the Project made to OOHC carers?	19
2.4 What evidence is there that the Project has helped reduce criminalisation and victimisation of young people in care?	20
2.5 What are the key learnings about the service model?.....	23
2.6 What did stakeholders think should be changed about the system?	27
3 Conclusion	31
3.1 Reach	31
3.2 Effectiveness – Young people	31
3.3 Effectiveness – Carers	32
3.4 Impact – On criminalisation, victimisation, leaving care.....	32
3.5 Stakeholder recommendations for systems change	33
3.6 Key learnings about the service model	33
3.7 Closing remarks	35
4 Methodology.....	36
4.1 Data collection methods.....	36
4.2 Data analysis	37
4.3 Reporting	37
5 Appendix	38
Appendix A – Theory of Change (July 2022).....	38
Appendix B – Legal health check	39

Acronyms and abbreviations

Within this report, the following terminology is used:

- **Carers** refers to residential care workers, kinship carers, foster carers, case managers and Better Futures workers, unless otherwise stated.
- **Out of home care (OOHC)** includes residential care, kinship care and foster care.
- **Young people** means youth up to 25 years of age who have lived in OOHC or were living in OOHC at the time they were assisted by this project.

Cafs	Child and Family Services
CLE	Community legal education
CP	Child Protection
DFFH	Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (Victoria)
DFV	Domestic and family violence
IVO	Intervention order
OOHC	Out of home care
ToC	Theory of change

1 Introduction

1.1 Project description

In 2022, Youthlaw secured funding from the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare's Philanthropic Funders Network for Stand Up For Our Rights (SUFOR; the Project), a 3-year youth empowerment pilot project to support children and young people in residential care in the Grampians Region. The Project was designed to provide young people in care with easy and timely access to legal information and assistance, and pathways to specialist legal support.

The Project aims to help young people in care understand their legal rights and options, empower them to make informed decisions, and obtain the legal assistance they need. The Project collaborates with care provider organisations, including residential care staff, to address systemic legal issues young people experience and build staff capacity to support young people with legal needs. SUFOR uses a strength-based approach, building knowledge and resilience of young people.

The project has been delivered in partnership with Ballarat Community Health, Child and Family Services (CAFS), Catholicare, Berry Street, BGT – Better Futures, and with support from local services such as Victoria Legal Aid, the Central Highlands Care Services Alliance and the Youth Justice Innovation Partnership (YJIP). A steering committee of local stakeholders has supported the project and a dedicated Operations Group from partner agencies met monthly to collaborate around service delivery and systemic issues.

At commencement, the project aimed to assist young people in residential care homes in Ballarat.¹ There are up to 30 children in residential care in Ballarat at any one time, with this number fluctuating. While the project continues to have a core focus on children living in residential care, since late 2023 its reach has expanded to include children in foster care, kinship care, young care leavers and those professionals who support them. This expansion continued in 2024, with strong relationships and referral pathways established².

At commencement, the project's terms of reference provided for advocacy to care providers, on behalf of children, in relation to children's rights and experience of the care environment. In practice, young people raised quasi-legal issues relating to the day-to-day care they were receiving in the homes. Feedback from care service providers indicated that using legal advocacy to address daily care issues was unproductive and potentially harmful to relationships between carers and young people. It was also identified as a barrier to the project building the reciprocal relationships with partner agencies required for the project to succeed. In mid-2023, the project's service delivery model was redesigned in response to partner and staff feedback.

After a well-attended workshop with partners in July 2023, and subsequent input from the operations group, a revised model was endorsed in November 2023. The revised model separated lawyers from issues arising from day-to-day care matters, which are now handled collaboratively by the SUFOR project's youth advocate and care teams/case managers, focusing on empowering young people to

¹ At the time of the funding application, there were 13 units with 33-bed capacity.

² BGT deliver Better Futures across the Central Highlands and Wimmera areas. It supports eligible young people on permanent care orders who are transitioning from out of home care to independence from age 16-18. Young people can opt to stay engaged with BGT after their experience of care ends at age 18 and ongoing support is available until they turn 21 (<https://www.bgt.org.au/community-youth-services>)

participate more in care decisions. Lawyer involvement in a child's experience of OOHC will only take place around issues such as placement, family reconciliation, urgent leaving care planning or safety issues. Otherwise, SUFOR lawyers largely support young people with general civil or criminal law issues. SUFOR lawyers have provided in-reach services at local provider sites over the course of the project, sitting within teams of workers at Cafs and Berry Street offices.

Team structure has changed over the three years of the project's operations. For the first 12 months the team comprised of a community lawyer (0.8FTE) and a Project officer/youth advocate (0.8FTE), located at Ballarat Community Health (Lucas site), together with another Youthlaw legal service. When the project's community lawyer moved on to another role, a strategic decision was taken to employ two (part-time) senior lawyers to job-share the role instead. This approach reflects the complexity of the work and the benefits of peer support.

See Appendix A for **SUFOR Theory of Change** (ToC) developed at project commencement in 2022, which describes the main activities of the project and shows the interrelated results for young people and residential care staff that those activities are intended to bring about.

The key aim of the project is to reduce criminalisation of vulnerable young people who are in or have experienced out of home care. It seeks to improve their knowledge of their legal rights and options, their confidence to assert their legal rights, and their access to justice.

1.2 Evaluation

Early in 2022, Youthlaw collaborated with WEstjustice's OOHC Legal Clinics project (a similar OOHC project operating in Melbourne's west) to engage an evaluation consultant to develop a ToC for each project, develop a monitoring and evaluation framework for use by both projects and to evaluate each project at the conclusion of funding. The projects have shared data collection tools and learnings over the last three years.

1.2.1 Scope and purpose

The SUFOR evaluation examined operations from commencement through to the end of the funded period: **11 July 2022 – 30 June 2025**.

The evaluation focused on questions about the effectiveness of the project and lessons learned about how legal services and services supporting children in out of home care can partner to help empower and support young people in residential care.

The evaluation was designed to answer the following **key questions**:

REACH	1. Who was assisted by the project and how?
EFFECTIVENESS	2. What changes did the Project produce for young people? 3. To what extent has the project improved the capabilities of services supporting children in out of home care? 4. What difference has the project made to workers advocating on behalf of young people?
IMPACT	5. What evidence is there that the Project has helped reduce victimisation and criminalisation of young people in care? 6. What difference has the Project made for young people leaving care or who have exited care?
LEARNINGS	7. What are the key learnings about the service model?
RECOMMENDATIONS	8. What system change recommendations emerge from the Project's experience?

1.2.2 Approach

The evaluation employed mixed methods, collecting primarily qualitative data, supplemented by some quantitative survey data, to answer the evaluation questions. Twelve stakeholders were interviewed, including the SUFOR youth lawyers³, the Youthlaw Youth Advocate & Project Manager, and staff and managers from partner organisations. Interviews sought to gather each stakeholder's insights about the service model and observations of the impact of the Project on young people and OOHC carers.

Feedback was collected from seven young people, via a questionnaire administered by a Youthlaw senior manager (not directly involved in the Project) and by the Youth Advocate.

The evaluation also analysed all service delivery data recorded during the Project.

Full details of the methodology are described in section 4.

³ The youth lawyer role was filled by one lawyer for the first 2.25 years and then by two senior lawyers from October 2024 onwards. For ease of reading, this report refers to "the youth lawyer" in the singular, though there have been multiple lawyers during the life of the pilot.

1.2.3 Limitations

Several limitations of this evaluation should be kept in mind when reading the findings.

Ideally, the evaluation would have drawn on both residential carers' and case managers' experiences of the service model, as well as their observations of the project's impacts. However, the evaluation did not include any residential carers involved in the daily care of young people at the care homes serviced by the Project, as it was identified during the planning phase that high levels of staff turnover meant that too few were likely to have been in their roles long enough to comment meaningfully. Case managers and Better Futures workers – who have a strong understanding of the Project's effects on carers – were interviewed.

The project's evaluation budget was modest, allowing for a small number of interviews. No consultations were sought with Child Protection, such that observations made by stakeholders about Child Protection have not been tested and there has been no opportunity for reply or explanation by the Department.

Six clients provided direct feedback, which while valuable and informative, provides preliminary insights that cannot be generalised to the broader client cohort assisted.

Due to the way data is recorded, the exact number of young people assisted is not known. SUFOR records clients assisted, however where discrete services (e.g. legal information, referral) are provided, the young person is not considered a client and is not given a client number. The number of discrete services is counted, but not the number of young people receiving those services. It has been assumed that the 110 discrete services delivered by SUFOR were delivered to 110 individuals. However, it is possible that some young people returned to SUFOR and received more than one discrete service. For example, if all young people who sought legal information only, did so twice, the total number of young people assisted by SUFOR would be 114 (i.e. 59 clients and 55 young people who each received two discrete services).

2 Findings

2.1 Who was assisted by the SUFOR Project and how?

This section presents data about legal assistance delivered to young people and services provided to partner organisations by the Project from **11 July 2022 – 30 June 2025**.

2.1.1 Legal assistance for young people⁴

168 young people were assisted

58 received **legal advice** or **casework**

110 received **discrete services** such as legal information

335 legal services delivered

Average number of **legal services per client** = 3.8

38% of legal services were delivered to **clients under 18 years**

Client profile⁵

- The project assisted **58 distinct clients with legal advice or casework**
 - **Gender:** 51% (20) identified as female; 49% (19) identified as male⁶
 - **Indigenous identity:** 14% (8) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
 - **Disability:** 41% (24) identified as having one or more disabilities: psychological disability (16) intellectual disability (10) and sensory/speech/other (8)⁷
 - **Homelessness risk:** 36% (14) were at risk of, or experiencing homelessness (12 and 2, respectively)⁸
- Clients assisted ranged in **age from 15 – 25 years**⁹ (see Table 1 and Figure 1)
 - Average age = 19.8 years
 - Median age = 20 years
 - Young people assisted were most commonly 20 years old

⁴ It is estimated that the project assisted 168 young people, however the number may be lower. SUFOR provided 110 discrete services, which have been assumed to be delivered to 110 individuals. However, it is possible that some young people returned to SUFOR and received another discrete service.

⁵ The client profile describes only those who received advice or casework. Young people who receive discrete services are not given a client number and demographic information about them is not recorded.

⁶ These figures are based on the 39 clients (67%) for whom gender was recorded. Gender was unknown or not disclosed for 19 clients (33%).

⁷ Total count of different disabilities reported exceeds number of clients reporting a disability, as 6 clients reported more than one disability.

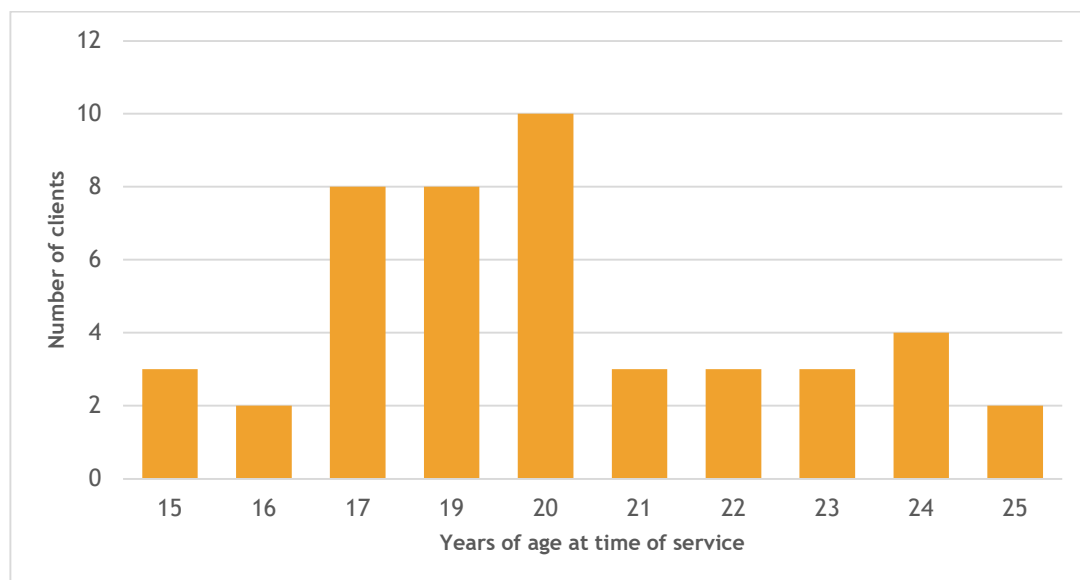
⁸ These figures are based on the 39 clients (67%) for whom housing status was recorded. Housing status was unknown for 19 clients (33%).

⁹ Age calculations are based on the 46 clients for whom age was recorded; age was unknown for 12 of the 59 clients.

Table 1: Number of young people assisted by SUFOR, number of services and average number of services provided, by age

Age of young person	Number of young people	Number of services	Average number of services by age ¹⁰
15 years	3	30	10
16 years	2	2	1
17 years	8	39	5
18 years	0	0	0
19 years	8	33	4
20 years	10	44	4
21 years	3	6	2
22 years	3	6	2
23 years	3	10	3
24 years	4	8	2
25 years	2	12	6
Unknown	12	145	11
TOTAL	58	335	

Figure 1: Number of SUFOR clients, July 2022 – June 2025, by age at time of service (n=46)¹¹



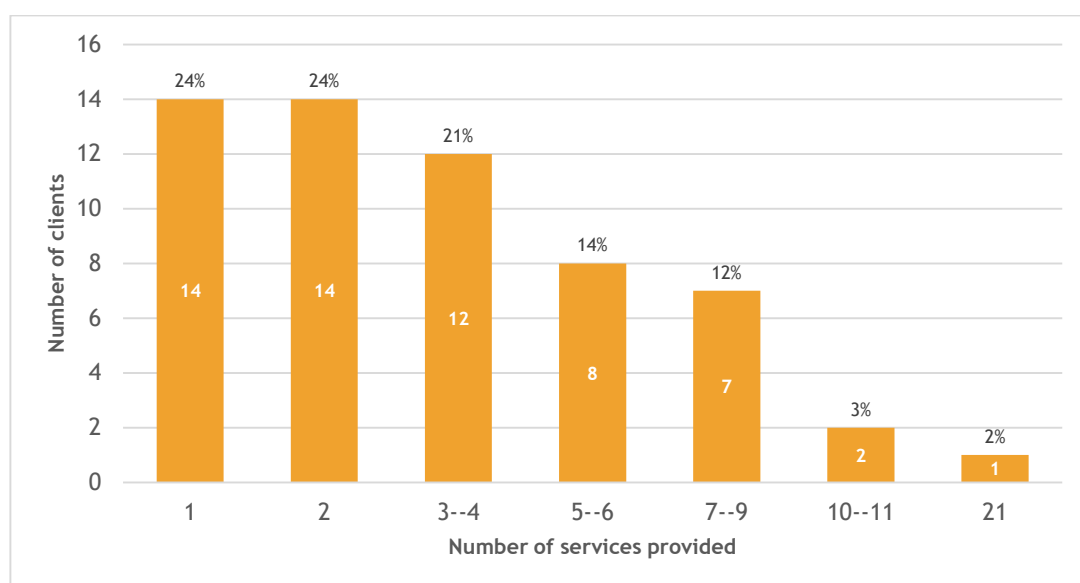
¹⁰ Rounded to nearest whole number.

¹¹ Age at time of service was not available for 12 clients.

Services

- SUFOR lawyers delivered **335 legal services** to young people – 225 services to clients and 110 discrete legal services to young people who were not clients.
 - Average number of legal services per client = 3.8. Range = 1 – 21
 - 24% of clients received 1 service; 24% - 2 services; 21% - 3 or 4 services; 31% - 5 or more services (see Figure 2)
 - Information and legal advice accounted for just over half of the services provided to all young people (see Figure 3). SUFOR delivered:
 - 131 information services (39%)
 - 63 referrals (19%)
 - 58 legal advices (17%)
 - Approximately three quarters of the legal services delivered to clients were to those 20 years or younger (see Figure 4)
 - 61% of services to clients aged 17 to 20 years
 - 21% of services to clients 21 years or older¹²

Figure 2: Number and percentage of SUFOR clients, July 2022 – June 2025, by number of services provided (n=58)



¹² These figures are calculated using data for the 190 services where age of client was recorded; age was unknown for 145 (16%) of the 335 services delivered.

Figure 3: Legal services provided to young people by SUFOR, July 2022 – June 2025, by number of services and percentage of all services (n=335)

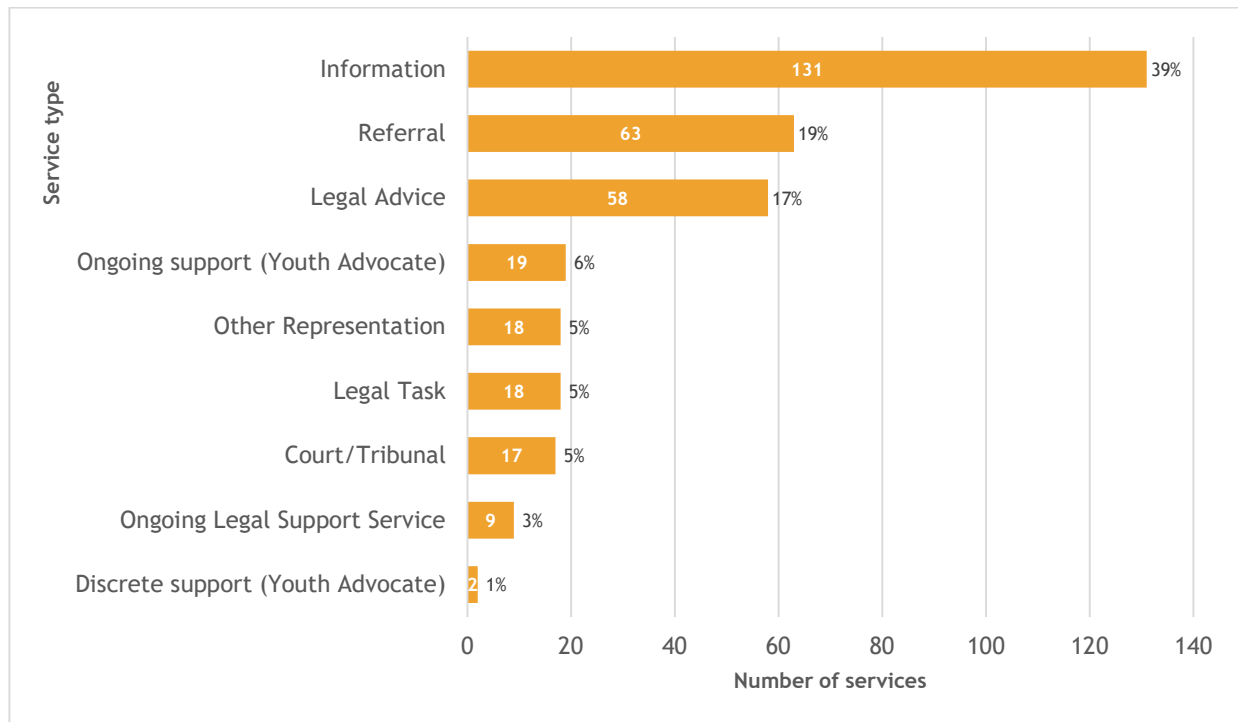
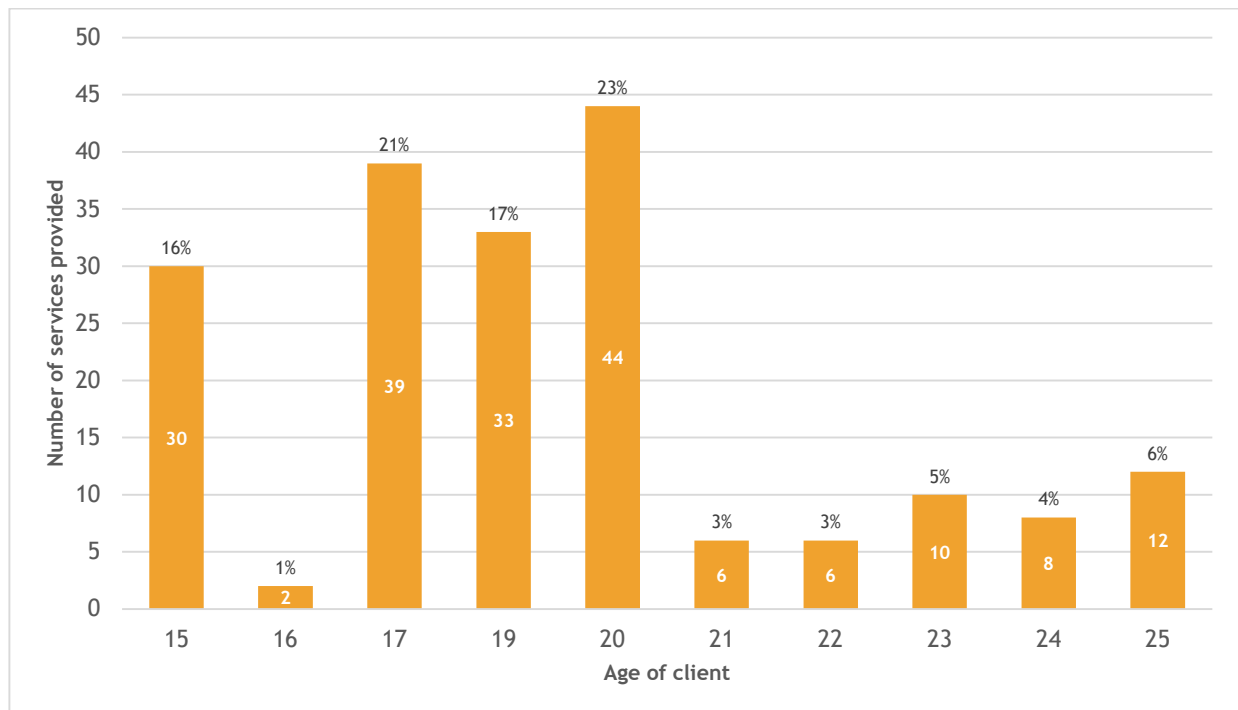


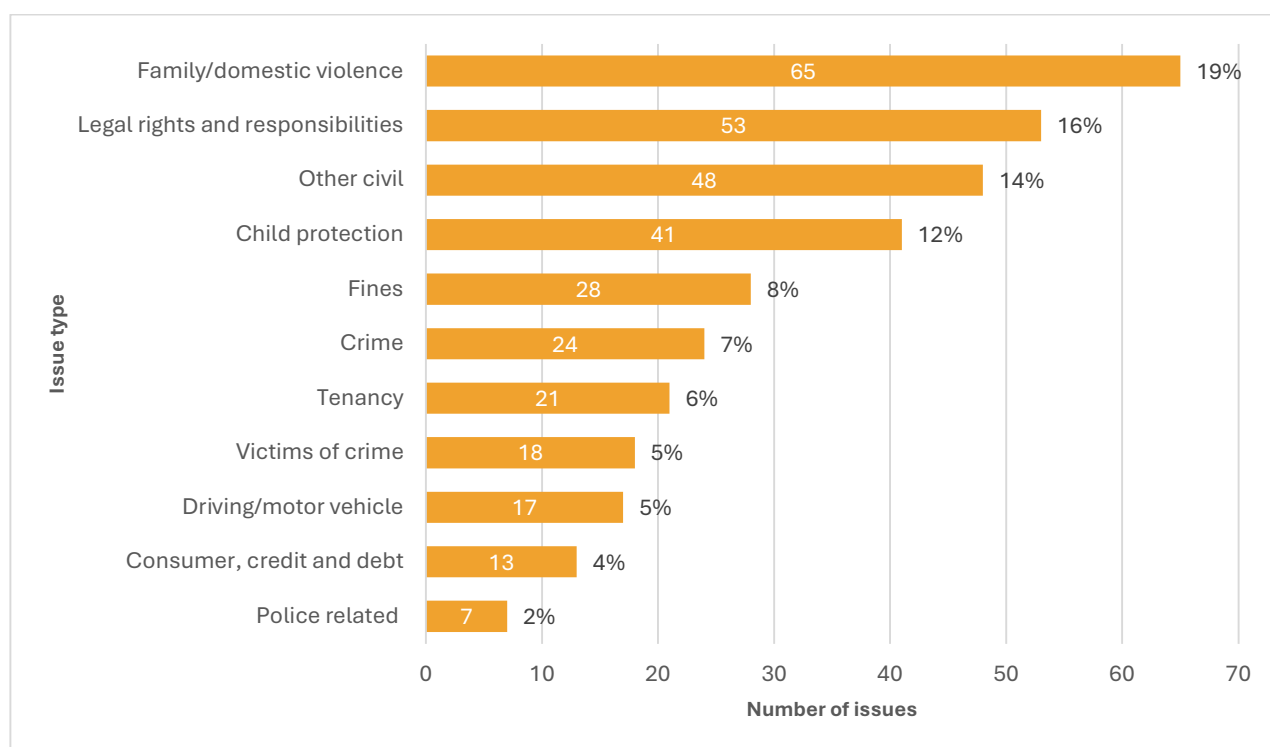
Figure 4: Number of services provided to SUFOR clients, July 2022 – June 2025, by age at time of service (n=190)¹³



¹³ Age of client was not available for 145 services provided.

- The most common **problem types** across all young people assisted were family/domestic violence and legal rights and responsibilities. Together these accounted for 35% of all services delivered to young people supported by SUFOR through casework, advice and discrete services. (For all issues see Figure 5.) The five most common issues were:
 - Family/domestic violence – 19% (65)
 - Legal rights and responsibilities¹⁴ – 16% (53)
 - Other civil¹⁵ – 14% (48)
 - Child protection¹⁶ – 12% (41)
 - Crime¹⁷ – 8% (28)

Figure 5: Problems young people were assisted with by SUFOR, July 2022 – June 2025, by number of matters and percentage of all matters (n=335)



- Most matters (63%; 83) were **referred** by a community support service, including housing and youth services (see Figure 6).

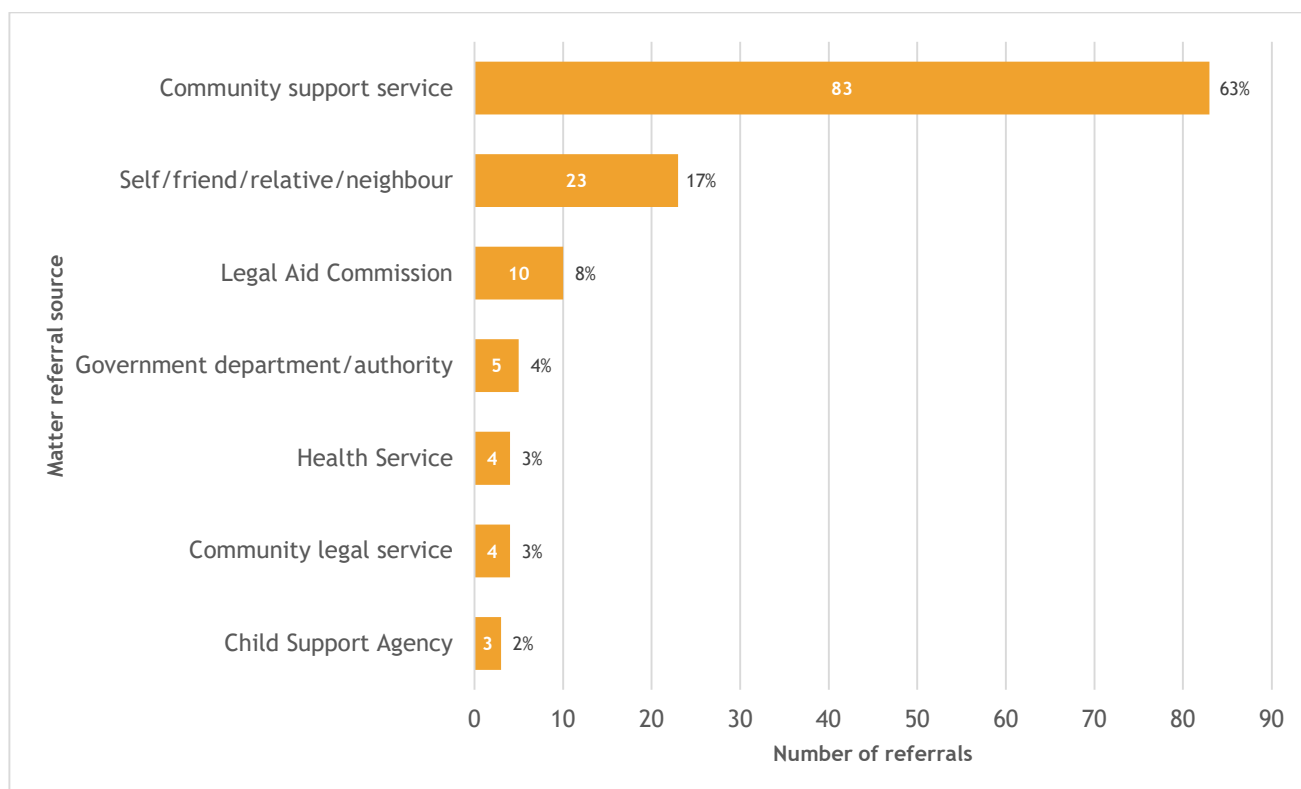
¹⁴ Included information about how to obtain legal help, young people's rights (e.g. with regard to police child protection), and information about SUFOR and the help it can provide.

¹⁵ This category consists of a wide range of issues, including government/FOI/privacy, guardianship for adults, restraining orders, employment, change of name or birth records, etc.

¹⁶ Included leaving care planning, child protection applications/orders, child contacts or contact orders, etc.

¹⁷ Included theft and related offences, injuries assaults, criminal assault, etc.

Figure 6: Source of referrals to SUFOR, July 2022 – June 2025, by number of matters referred and percentage of all matters referred (n=132)¹⁸



2.1.2 Services for partners

Secondary consultations

SUFOR staff provided at least 109 secondary consultations to staff at partner organisations.¹⁹

Secondary consultations addressed a wide range of subjects, most commonly legal rights and responsibilities, tenancy issues, child protection issues, family violence, accessing legal services and victim compensation.

Legal Education

SUFOR staff delivered 14 community legal education activities to 4 partner organisations between February 2023 and June 2024²⁰. Most CLE was delivered via in-person presentations (8 across Cafs, Better Futures and Berry Street), with some (3) delivered online. CLE included case scenarios about DFV, IVOs, child protection, age of consent, police complaints, criminal matters, fines, and Introduction to the Framework to reduce criminalisation of young people in residential care (the Framework).

Secondary consultation: process of providing legal information to staff at partner agencies; client is not and cannot be identified and there is no disclosure of individual information in the process. Increases partner staff knowledge of young people's rights and options and equips them to provide better support.

¹⁸ Referral source was not recorded for 203 matters.

¹⁹ It is understood that there were occasions when lawyers had brief/informal chats with partner organisation staff and did not record these as secondary consultations, though the same type of information sharing occurred.

²⁰ Data was not available on CLE delivery for other time periods of the Project.

Several partner organisation stakeholders shared positive feedback about training provided by SUFOR. (See also section 2.3.1.)

“They came in and they gave us all of the information on [scenarios when] you need the police... and the impacts of calling the police... and it's like, ‘oh, well, now that you've said it, that makes sense’ and provided ways to navigate how that could be better approached. It was really insightful. [It gave participants] a better understanding of the negative impact it can have on young people when the workers call police.” – Partner organisation staff

2.2 What changes did the Project produce for young people?

This section reports on the changes experienced by young people as a result of the Project. These changes align with the intended outcomes outlined in the Project’s ToC (see Appendix A).

2.2.1 Young people’s experience of help

Young people interviewed for this evaluation were asked what they liked most about the help they received from the Project. Their responses included the following main themes:

- Staff were kind and understanding
- Young people felt supported and listened to without judgment
- Needed information was clearly explained

2.2.2 Improved knowledge and understanding

Stakeholders and SUFOR staff reported that a major benefit of the Project has been educating young people about their rights and helping them understand how their rights can and should be upheld. This was found to be valuable in all circumstances, but particularly when young people are transitioning out of care or have criminal matters.

Young people’s knowledge has been strengthened through direct consultations with SUFOR staff as well as through support from carers who have received secondary consultations via the Project.

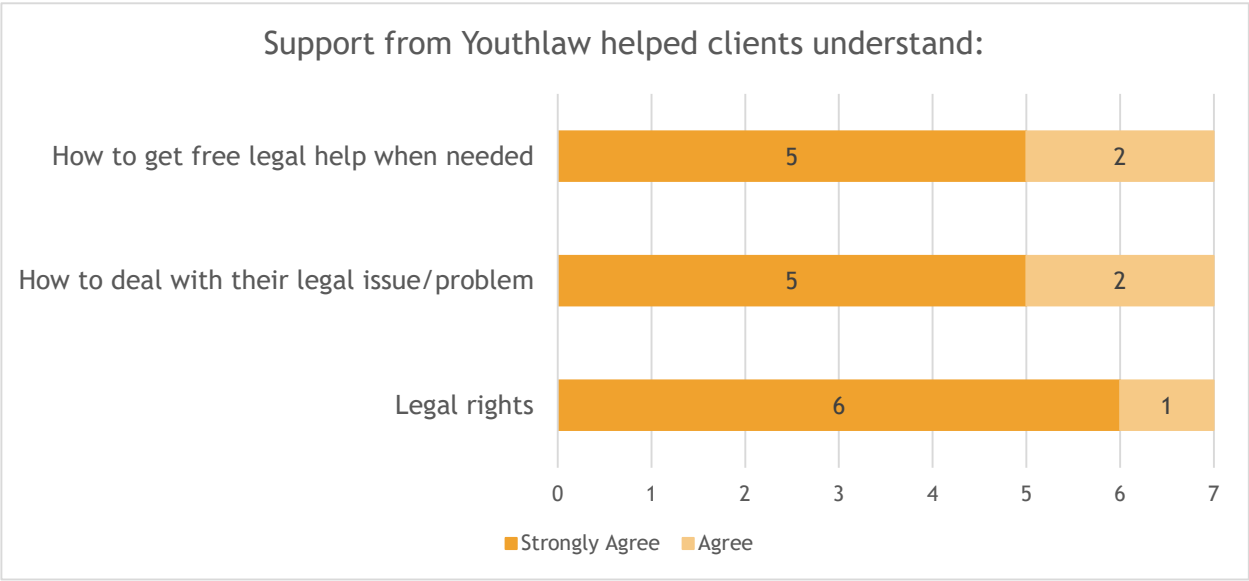
“I think it makes them more aware of how they should be treated... To have someone reinforcing what we're saying, that they've got rights, and then you've got legal representation saying, ‘yeah, you do have rights and this is what should be done’”. – Partner organisation staff

All young people who completed the client feedback survey reported that support from SUFOR helped increase their knowledge and understanding of their legal rights, how to deal with their legal issue/problem and how to get free legal help when they need it (see Figure 6).

“One of the best things I reckon was they actually explained things rather than rushing through the process. I got a better understanding of the process.” – Client survey respondent

“One of them had a baby and wanted information on parenting rights and stuff with the father... [I got a] secondary consult, gave them the information, and then because they were prepared, [when they went through the processes] they were like, ‘well, it's not as scary’. So that was really positive.” – Partner organisation staff

Figure 7: Number of clients who agreed that support from Youthlaw helped improve their understanding, by key knowledge area (n=7)



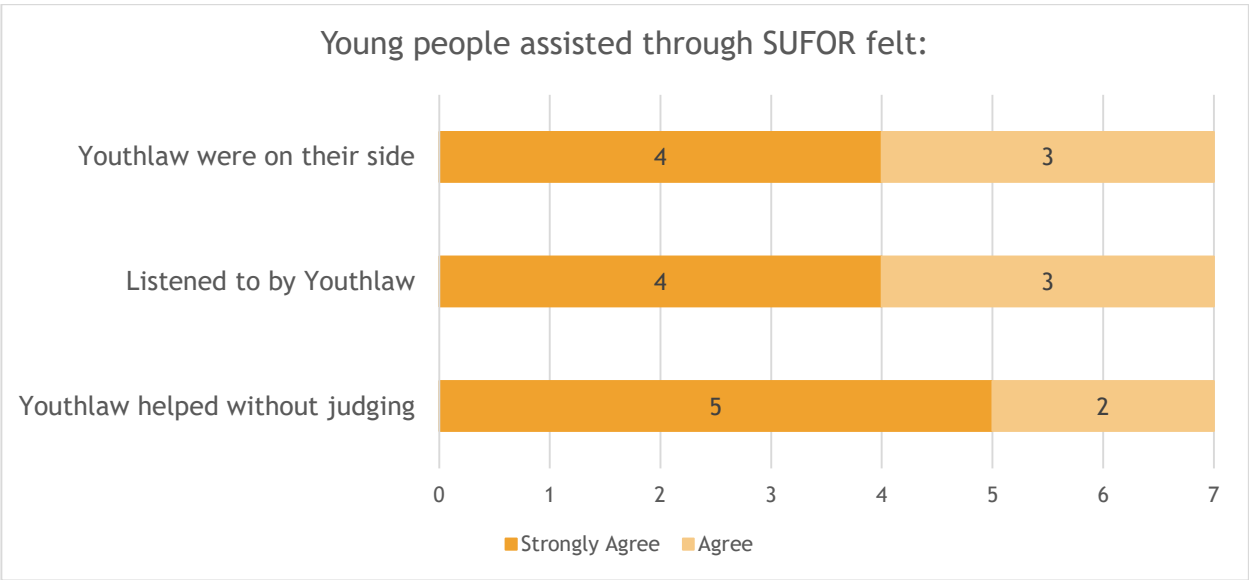
Numerous carers observed that positive experiences with the SUFOR lawyers gave young people confidence to contact SUFOR lawyers again if needed,

“They know who they need to contact when they're in trouble, they build that relationship with the lawyers. They don't do that necessarily with other lawyers. So that's one thing that I've seen with my young people is that they're OK to call the [SUFOR] lawyer that they've spoken to, they know them well, and they would not normally do that.” – Partner organisation staff

2.2.3 Feeling supported, heard, respected

All clients surveyed reported feeling supported, heard and respected in their interactions with SUFOR staff (see Figure ##).

Figure 8: Number of clients who agreed they felt supported, heard and respected by Youthlaw (n=7)



Clients described SUFOR staff as kind and working hard for the young person's best interests.

"I don't understand the justice system and I couldn't understand what was happening because I was so stressed out. [The SUFOR lawyer] explained it really well. She listened a lot and took on a lot of stress and worries. She was practical. She was non-judgemental. She made me feel ok and listened to. She was on the ball about everything." – Client survey respondent

"How nice she is and how she puts things forward and wanted the best for me. She had a very good heart in the right place. I ended up with the best possible outcome." – Client survey respondent

Partner organisation staff noted that SUFOR lawyers were compassionate and supportive of young people, which can help them move past the event and not fall into a spiral of criminal behaviour.

"One of the young people they did do the wrong thing and the way they were supported, they didn't feel like just because they've made a mistake they've ruined their life. The support that was given to them was like 'everybody makes mistakes. It's OK. We'll get through it. We'll move forward.' And that was a really positive thing for them because then when they did turn 18, they didn't feel like they were stepping into this space as the world's worst person [they didn't have a criminal record] and their mindset was... it doesn't mean that now for the rest of your life you're going to be affected." – Partner organisation staff

Several partner organisation staff observed that young people felt a strong sense of the lawyer being their advocate, and that their positive experiences with SUFOR lawyers encourages young people to reach out again if needed and can give them more confidence in the legal system.

"There's something different in this it because it's young person-led in terms of when Youthlaw would become involved... Young people have a sense that this person works for you [the young person] and they are there to raise your views, your perspectives and to get some decision making, some answers. There is something in that, that young people do respond to. A sense that 'they're *my* lawyer.'" – Partner organisation staff

"It's given them clear options and choices and they've been represented fairly. I think that feels very confident, trusting the system I guess. Like they haven't been let down again. It's changed their perspective because it's been such a nice experience. They don't have such a distaste and if anything else happens again, they're confident to reach out themselves because they know [the SUFOR lawyer] actually did help me and they were really good." – Partner organisation staff

2.2.4 Receiving rightful support

Many SUFOR staff and stakeholders reported that a major benefit of the Project was its advocacy on behalf of young people, which secured their access to entitled supports and services. It was reported that while the responsibilities of Child Protection vis-à-vis young people in care are clearly prescribed, often those obligations are not being fulfilled. This was noted by stakeholders as a particularly frustrating and problematic issue for young people nearing 18 years (**care leavers**), for whom a range of planning should take place to support their transition out of care. It was further noted that any checks and monitoring processes to ensure Child Protection are properly fulfilling care duties are not transparent to carers.

"The advocacy is very clear cut because it says what you've got to do – you're meant to have done leaving care planning [etc.]... we have a limited picture, but the picture that we have from the people that we have assisted is that this just is not happening. As a matter of course, they're not doing any of this work... It's been a really effective service to agitate. Because once they're eighteen, they're so easily not anyone's responsibility. So there's this urgent thing to do before they turn 18 to try and get the Department to do what it's supposedly meant to be doing about housing [etc.] I think in that space the project's been sensational." – SUFOR staff.

"We've been able to create a level of accountability... care leaving is a key example of that. So there should be care leaving planning going on, there should be an application made for Home Stretch... in an ideal world this this stuff should be happening and the only reason we have a role is because it's not being done." – SUFOR staff

The SUFOR lawyers and youth advocate were able to hold Child Protection to account in instances where carers had been unsuccessful in their advocacy to Child Protection, including in relation to leaving care plans, housing post-care, contact with family of origin, care team meetings. This was attributed to the project staff's persistence, their independence from the systems they sought to influence, and leverage produced by having a lawyer involved.

"[We] had issues with a care team and could see that potentially Child Protection were not doing what they were required to do and the young person's voice wasn't being heard. Bringing anyone from Stand Up For Our Rights [in] really changed the way the care teams worked, held them accountable. It's like if they respected us a bit more and even the young person... then maybe it wouldn't be needed. It shouldn't have to take a lawyer. But Youthlaw makes it happen sometimes when we can't get it rolling." – Partner organisation staff

"One of the benefits here is an independent organisation, involving lawyers and [a youth advocate] who can bear witness to some of these experiences and where things are going wrong, seek some accountability from the system and push back. Within the system there are some really wonderful advocates, but as a whole, there are just so many ongoing challenges that mean these young people are not supported in the way they should be. But I think a project like this can push back and seek clarification and seek answers and that in and of itself provides lot of value." – SUFOR staff

"... that stuff wasn't being done and it did get done when I started banging on doors, chasing people down, going to care team meetings. It's just a bit frustrating that it feels like it's not really a role in itself, it's just making sure that people are following up on their own things. And without that, things wouldn't have got done. There is absolutely no doubt about the fact that if I hadn't been doing what I was doing, those things would not have got done." – SUFOR staff

2.2.5 Increased voice in decision making

Stakeholders reported that the Project helped elevate young people's voices in the decision-making processes that affect them. For example, the youth advocate attended care team meetings and raised matters on behalf of young people, while lawyers represented young people with criminal matters, ensuring their circumstances and perspectives are heard by decision-makers.

One partner organisation felt that the Project gave carers another avenue to help raise the voice of the child and help hold decision makers accountable to the principle of the best interests of the child. Even when a young person's preferred outcome was not achieved (e.g. regarding placement), stakeholders noted that including them in discussions was still valuable.

"I think it's helped contribute to providing a voice or being able to bring a young person's views and wishes – their voice can get some sort of traction – whether that is in their planning, whether it is in terms of a placement move... And it's got those working with vulnerable young people thinking about a different way to get their voice heard." – Partner organisation staff

"I think one of the benefits of a project like this is that it does add a voice to young people who might not otherwise have as strong a voice. I think that there is a gap for a whole lot of reasons, and a need for someone to be able to advocate for their needs alongside their care team." – SUFOR staff

All clients surveyed reported that support from Youthlaw helped them feel more included in decisions being made about them by others.²¹

2.2.6 Legal issues addressed

All clients surveyed reported that assistance from the SUFOR lawyer was helpful and described a range of positive legal outcomes, including debts being waived, avoiding criminal charges and avoiding licence suspension. Several clients described positive flow on effects that legal assistance had on their lives.

"I was in court for a driving matter. [The SUFOR lawyer] persuaded the court to give me the chance I needed. She got the ducks lined up. If she hadn't then I would have lost my licence. Because she helped, I kept my licence. This allowed me to go back to work and get my life back on track. I only got a fine." – Client survey respondent

"Made me not get charges on my record so I can keep my job." – Client survey respondent

"Yeah, it means I'm not locked up. [If Youthlaw hadn't helped, I'd have] rotted away to be honest." – Client survey respondent

Similarly, stakeholders described how help from SUFOR helped reduce the stress and disruption experienced by young people who experience legal issues. Stakeholders said legal help provided by SUFOR could achieve more therapeutic outcomes, better support young people's wellbeing and can influence a more positive trajectory. (See Matilda's story, p.14.)

"A young person had been taken advantage of by a telco provider... SUFOR were able to advocate on [her] behalf... with the telco, and it led to... some of those debts [being] cleared and... it freed her up financially, which then reduced the stress that she was experiencing and then allowed her to work on other goals." – Partner organisation staff

²¹ 4 strongly agreed and 3 agreed.

Several clients described that if they had not been helped through SUFOR, they would have felt angry or powerless or simply did not know what they would have done about their legal issue.

"I'd be angry. I would have been upset." – Client survey respondent

"I would have walked into court blindsided. I would have just agreed to whatever the court told me." – Client survey respondent

"I probably would have paid [the debt that was waived] like a chump." – Client survey respondent

Several stakeholders noted the importance of providing legal help to young people both in-care and post-care; with the transitional period into independent living, for those children who age out of the Child Protection system, being identified as a critical point where support and advocacy is needed. Better Futures provides individualised support services to young people up to age 21 who are transitioning out of or who have left care, including help with housing, health and wellbeing, education, employment, and community and cultural connections.²² However, not all young people who could benefit from these services access them. Child Protection does not always make referrals during care-leaving planning as intended, and participation in the program is voluntary. It was described that many processes and supports for young people are not implemented and that residential care homes poorly prepare young people for independent living.

"The thing is there are mechanisms there that are designed to stop young people from falling through the cracks when they leave care, but they don't seem to necessarily be implemented." – SUFOR staff

"The leaving care space has a lot more that's required. It's such a massive step down from when you've been institutionalised, from being in a residential care home, to being out on your own. There's no step-down kind of model." – SUFOR staff

"In residential care, we [have a policy] of don't charge the kids [for minor property damage]. And I don't believe in charging them, but how do they understand that when they go out into the big wide world, they're going to get charged for doing things like that. So it's a really hard system to work in because... they want us to gentle parent these kids that that don't require gentle parenting. There's a time and place for gentle parenting. But there's a time and place for boundaries and rules and consequences... And you're trying to parent with ten other parents and we all have different values and beliefs and not all of them even have a meaningful relationship with the young person, you've got different staff there all the time." – Carer

²² See [Better Futures - DFFH Service Providers](#) (accessed 18 September 2025).

Case study – Matilda’s story

Matilda is a First Nations young person assisted by the SUFOR project. She was 17 years old when we met her and she had recently been diagnosed with an intellectual disability. Matilda had experienced family violence and trauma her whole life.



Sometimes Matilda finds it hard to regulate her emotions and make safe decisions. The court said she couldn't live at home with her parents because it was too unsafe for her. There were limited placement options available and so she found herself living in residential out of home care in Ballarat.

In 2024 she was charged with theft from a milk bar and, after an altercation when police were called, she was also charged with resisting arrest and assaulting police. Local police knew Matilda lived in residential care and she'd been stopped by police many times before, but this was the first time she'd been in serious trouble. She was placed on bail.

Matilda was referred to the SUFOR project by one of her residential care workers.

The team met with Matilda many times, listened to her needs, built a relationship of trust and explained her legal options to her. A SUFOR lawyer represented Matilda in the Children's Court. They were able to have Matilda's bail discharged and they negotiated a caution for the theft charge. Following further negotiations with police, Matilda was placed on diversion for the remaining charges, which she completed successfully. This outcome means that Matilda now has no disclosable criminal record.

By assisting Matilda to exit out of the justice system at an early stage, the Project is setting her up with the best chance to avoid future offending and move on with her life in a positive way.

As Matilda was nearing her 18th birthday, the SUFOR team was also able to assist her to have her voice heard when plans were being made to exit her from care. She was very nervous about where she would live and how she would be supported in the community once she turned 18 and aged out of the child protection system.. The SUFOR Youth Advocate attended Matilda's care team meetings and advocated for a local placement that suited Matilda's support needs. With lots of help, Matilda has been able to succeed in the community. She still checks in with the SUFOR team from time to time when she needs information or advice about managing life as an adult.

The period after leaving care was noted as a critical window when wrap around support can make a significant difference to a young person's trajectory.

"There is value in providing legal help to kids who have transitioned out of the child protection system. We've helped care leavers with fines, debts, criminal matters relating to driving, assault, and swearing. There have been a couple of cases where charges have been withdrawn and we've made some police complaints... We helped people reporting sexual assaults to police and we had lots of inquiries about VOCAT and child sexual exploitation." – SUFOR staff

2.2.7 Empowered to voice needs and concerns

Young people and SUFOR staff and stakeholders described numerous examples of the Project helping young people feel empowered – to voice their needs, express concerns and make informed decisions.

Most clients surveyed (6 out of 7)²³ reported that support from Youthlaw helped them feel more confident to speak up about what they need.

“[The youth advocate] improved a lot of things, especially my confidence and self-esteem. Youthlaw helped me to feel more confident to speak up when I’m worried about something. I felt confident speaking up to [the youth advocate] and felt confident about [her] talking on my behalf to DHS because DHS simply weren’t listening to me. As it went on, [she] gave me confidence to talk to DHS again. – Client survey respondent

Several stakeholders reported that support from SUFOR helped young people feel more confident to speak up about breaches of their rights.

“I’ve got one [client] that’s had a couple of cases of police brutality, so they’re going through the process of all that at the moment. Every time he gets arrested, he now talks about how the police have treated him... he knows that that’s not OK, so now he will come and tell me about it... So I think it’s [the Project] made them more aware that they shouldn’t be treated that way.” – Partner organisation staff

One stakeholder described that the Project provided a needed avenue for young people in care to voice concerns about their care. They noted that while a young person who is unhappy about their care can make a complaint against their residential care provider that will be investigated by that care provider, the next/other option is a complaint to the Children’s Commissioner, which was described as “a huge step” for a young person to take.²⁴ SUFOR was described as providing an accessible alternative.

“There’s the Children’s Commissioner, but there’s no one in between... If we’ve got a child that wants to put in a complaint, they can put in a complaint against [the residential care provider] and we investigate and we take that seriously... And then there’s the Children’s Commissioner, and that’s a huge step. So that’s why I always liked the idea of Stand Up For Our Rights being that middle and local locally based. I’m not sure if we got there in the end, but I certainly know the efforts were there for that.” – Partner organisation staff

²³ One client reported a neutral impact on their confidence to speak up.

²⁴ The Commission for Children and Young People has some limited powers to intervene in individual complaints raised by children in care. See [CCYP | Get help or make a complaint](#).

2.3 What difference has the Project made to OOHC carers?

This section presents findings about the changes the Project brought about for carers.

2.3.1 Improved capabilities

Feedback from Project and partner organisation staff consistently emphasised the value of the Project in building carer knowledge of the rights and entitlements of young people living in OOHC. Secondary consultations – with over 109 delivered to individual carers – were noted as the main mechanism for this capability uplift. It was also supported by the delivery of 11 group education sessions at partner organisations and through informal chats between carers and SUFOR lawyers on days the lawyers worked at partner organisation offices.

Carers²⁵ described increased **understanding** of:

- The rights of young people in OOHC and how DFFH and Child Protection should be fulfilling those obligations
- The rights of young people involved with criminal justice system, including their rights if arrested and the processes that should be followed
- Other general legal issues, rights and entitlements (e.g. disability support; contracts with telcos; domestic and family violence)
- Free legal support available through Youthlaw and other legal services

“It’s helping us as workers, with our knowledge around the system and what should be being done for the young people.” – Partner organisation staff

“They’ve [partner organisations] been very open to education sessions about how to identify legal issues, what some of the legal issues might be, other than criminal matters, so that’s been really good.” – SUFOR staff

“It built my capacity in that I’ve now got a greater understanding of the potential of that [misleading conduct by a telco] happening for young people who are vulnerable... In terms of identifying issues and who to go to for support, I’ve increased my knowledge in that sense.” – Partner organisation staff

The Project delivered training to carers on how to use a **Legal Health Check** tool (see Appendix B). This tool equips carers to identify legal problems commonly experienced by young people and facilitates timely assistance before legal issues escalate into more serious problems. Some partner organisations reported that their involvement with the Project led to Legal Health Checks being embedded in their intake process.

“We knew of the [Legal Health Check form], but we weren’t using it on a regular basis. Then when Stand Up For Our Rights started... we decided to adopt that as part of our initial registration documentation... It’s a really good thing to be in that kit that we start off with. A lot of young people don’t think. ‘Oh, there’s a fine from two years ago.’ So when you’re identifying all that stuff to begin

²⁵ These findings mainly apply to non-residential carers – data show that secondary consultations to residential care staff mainly provided information about SUFOR and how and when to make referrals.

with, then you can go and sort it out, but otherwise it wouldn't come up necessarily in our forms.” – Partner organisation staff

2.3.2 Advocating for young people

The evaluation received feedback from numerous carers that having a deeper understanding of young people’s rights, combined with collaborative support from SUFOR staff, strengthened their **confidence** to advocate for young people’s rights to be upheld, and for entitled supports and services to be provided.

“We know [what the Department should be doing], but sometimes we're not confident enough to [say] ‘actually, you should have this’. And whenever you ask questions through the [Child Protection office]... everything's really vague... the Child Protection manual is a little bit grey.” – Partner organisation staff

“We can provide confidential advice to that worker and say, ‘these are some of the options that might be available’ and then from there, it might be a referral, but even if [not], it's given that worker some knowledge to be able to step into a space where they might not have felt as confident stepping into. So I think the secondary consultation model has worked really well.” – SUFOR staff

Numerous stakeholders described that the involvement of a lawyer in advocacy on behalf of clients was more effective and enabled outcomes where previously carers had been unable to obtain action or sometimes even responses, from Child Protection. Successful collaboration between SUFOR staff and carers, in particular around leaving care planning, has encouraged further **collaborative advocacy**.

“We're fighting against everyone, constantly. So it feels like we have an ally come in and they're supporting our young people with us... We feel like we're doing it by ourselves a lot of the time, so it's nice to have someone come on board that's actually working with us for the young person, for the same goals, really actually listening to the young person.” – Partner organisation staff

“The guidelines, they're either too big and broad or they're no-ones [responsibility] until we get lawyers involved. I've never seen anyone move so fast than to have them [SUFOR staff] sit in the care team... [Then] we have accountability and everything was done properly, documented meeting minutes, they were moving.” – Partner organisation staff

2.4 What evidence is there that the Project has helped reduce criminalisation and victimisation of young people in care?

This section describes stakeholder feedback about the Project’s contribution to reducing criminalisation and victimisation of young people in OOH in the Grampians region.

2.4.1 Criminalisation

Children and young people in the child protection system, especially those living in out of home residential care, are over-represented in the criminal justice system and are also more likely to have unnecessary police contact, or their behaviour criminalised, than other young people.²⁶

criminalisation: the process by which behaviours and individuals are transformed into crime and criminals.

Framework to reduce criminalisation of young people in residential care. (2020)

Stakeholders described two main ways in which the Project has contributed to reduced criminalisation of young people in OOHC:

- Assisting young people with criminal matters to achieve therapeutic outcomes (e.g. diversion, caution), which Project staff described helps reduce the chance of future offending and further involvement in the criminal justice system. (See Matilda's story.) Therapeutic outcomes are enabled through negotiations by the Project lawyers (informed by their understanding of the particular needs and circumstances of young people in care) and young people attending court, which is more likely when SUFOR lawyers have helped young people prepare for and understand court processes.
- Increasing carer understanding of the [Framework to reduce criminalisation of young people in residential care](#) (the Framework), through training and to a lesser extent, secondary consultations. Better understanding of the Framework supports adherence to its principles.

Several stakeholders were of the view that the Project played an important role in improved practices related to criminalisation (e.g. police called less often to help with non-crisis situations in care homes) that they had observed. It was reported that case managers who participated in training about the Framework delivered by SUFOR staff, shared key messages of the training with residential care workers and influenced improvements in their management of behaviours of concern.

"I think there's been a big reduction in my perspective, of young people in residential care being charged for things like property damage and having to go to court for causing damage to property in the residential homes. And I think a lot of that has come through case managers in particular, communicating with the Project through education type sessions, to then be able to pass that information on to the residential carers who work with the young people directly." – Partner organisation staff

"The out of home care Framework coupled with Youthlaw being advocates, it's made us stop and think a little bit more about not just the easy option of police coming to help our staff. I think probably the Project did help it because of staff being able to reach out and ask the questions, which I know makes a difference." – Partner organisation staff

"I think training workers around both victimisation and criminalisation of young people in care is really important because the more people who are working in this space with young people who are in care or leaving care, who understand how to support through the prism of them being overrepresented as

²⁶ Sentencing Advisory Council (2019).

both victims of crime and criminalised, the better. I think that's certainly a direct outcome of the Project.” – SUFOR staff

Stakeholders flagged two ongoing key challenges to reducing the criminalisation of young people in OOHC:

- Nature of residential care workforce – high turnover, limited training and high use of temporary agency staff – makes sustained capability improvements difficult
- Execution of safe custody warrants when a child runs away from placement. Police sometimes put children in handcuffs and return them to the care home in police divisional vans.

2.4.2 Victimisation

SUFOR staff described aspects of their work that aim to help reduce victimisation of young people in care – providing information and advice about their rights to young people, assisting with intervention orders (applications, enforcement) to protect safety and building the capabilities of carers to protect young people – but noted these were “small steps in a much bigger systemic issue.”

victimisation: subjecting or threatening to subject a child or young person to any harmful behaviour, maltreatment or abuse. For example, bullying, cyberbullying, criminal acts (e.g., assault, sexual assault, theft), intentionally damaging property.

To this end, Project staff have participated in different networks and groups undertaking systemic advocacy to help address high levels of sexual exploitation of young people in care in the region. These included Central Highlands Care Service Alliance, Youth Justice Innovations Partnership and Berry Street forum on sexual exploitation.

SUFOR staff also supported some young people who had been victims of crime to apply to the Financial Assistance Scheme (previously Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal) for financial support.

There was a strong sense among SUFOR staff that although the direct support provided to young people was valuable, the scale and complexity of the problem meant the Project’s capacity to reduce victimisation was limited. Residential care homes were described as inherently chaotic and risky environments that create high levels of vulnerability to exploitation and other harm.

“[Victimisation is] a really big systemic issue that requires changes... to how young people who are victims of crime, say victims of sexual exploitation, are being supported by police to bring perpetrators to account. That is something that requires multi-agency collaboration and commitment from Victoria Police as well.” – SUFOR staff

“I don't think young people should be in residential care without the highest level of qualified staff, working with teams of psychologists and education specialists and nurses and social workers. I don't think there would be many residential care workers at that level. You might have some, but they need to be working with highly, highly, highly qualified specialists, and there needs to be a lot less of them [young people] in the house. But... they want to put in more kids in the houses and a lot of the reason they move around all the time, is because of the dynamics between them... the whole residential care system needs an overhaul.” - SUFOR staff

2.5 What are the key learnings about the service model?

This section presents key learnings about the service model used by the Project. It outlines strengths, challenges, enabling factors and areas for improvement regarding the model design, engaging young people and partnering.

2.5.1 Service delivery model

Strengths

Stakeholders and staff highlighted numerous aspects of the service delivery model as key strengths that support engagement and effectiveness.

Monthly co-location / outposts of lawyers at partner organisations. This was reported by partner staff and SUFOR lawyers to provide numerous benefits:

- Enabled partner staff and Youthlaw staff to better understand each other's work and build trusted relationships
- Provided partner staff easy access to lawyers for secondary consultations and informal chats, which builds capabilities
- Enabled lawyers to develop CLE informed by trends observed in topics arising in secondary consultations and informal chats with partner staff
- Is efficient, as lawyers can continue their work around consultations and chats with partner staff.

"When they're able to hot desk and come into the into our office... I find that really helpful – to be able to touch base in person, if there's anything that's particularly challenging or we're needing some advice on. That's been really, really useful." – Partner staff

SUFOR staff characteristics. Partner staff and clients highlighted various qualities exhibited by SUFOR staff that they valued and that facilitated productive engagement with them. Stakeholders valued that SUFOR lawyers:

- Respond to enquiries and referrals in a timely manner
- Communicate clearly with partner staff and clients, avoiding legal jargon that can be alienating
- Are kind and caring
- Are experienced practitioners

"[The SUFOR lawyer] was so kind and understanding and patient with me, she really was amazing." – Client survey respondent

"... being very available, so even if they're not in the office, being like, 'Oh yeah, I'm here. What do you need?' Not that they're dropping everything, but we don't feel like we're chasing." – Partner staff

Meeting clients where they are. SUFOR staff were reported to be understanding, flexible and responsive to the needs and circumstances of clients. Several examples of the client-centred approach taken by the team include:

- SUFOR staff are flexible regarding where they meet clients and endeavour to meet in locations that best suit the client

- SUFOR staff reschedule missed appointments as many times as needed, making ongoing and proactive efforts to engage young people (as compared to many services that close files after three “no shows”)

Team roles and support. Key aspects of the SUFOR team and support structures were reported to be beneficial (though several areas were flagged as lacking; see Areas for improvement, below).

- The youth advocate role was highly valued by partner staff. Several reported that the youth advocate was able to elevate young people’s voices and influence care team meetings and hold child protection accountable in ways that partner staff had not been able to, despite their efforts.
- The lawyers who work on SUFOR also do general Youthlaw work. This provides them more work variety and collegiate support; both valuable when working in the OOHC sector, where high proportions of youth have experienced / are experiencing trauma.
- Professional development support provided valued opportunities for SUFOR team members to debrief and receive emotional and professional support. For lawyers, this was through regular reflective practice sessions with an external psychologist while the youth advocate received additional regular supervision from a social worker.
- A collaborative practice group was established with Westjustice lawyers delivering a similar project to children in residential care in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. Ad hoc communication among group members was reported to provide some support and opportunity to share approaches and learnings, although there was potential for greater engagement and benefit.

Areas for improvement

All SUFOR staff interviewed noted the complexity and challenges inherent to the OOHC sector and described the emotional toll of working in that space.

“It is actually quite devastating work to be involved in. You do need to have a way to manage... It’s an awful thing to go out to those homes and see how those young people are living.” – SUFOR staff

“The whole system is completely stuffed... There’s just so much. Where do you start? It’s really overwhelming... It’s too traumatising. [Residential care] staff get physically assaulted. There’s the subject of vicarious trauma. It’s no place to work, so it’s certainly no place to live.” – SUFOR staff

The following were suggested by staff or stakeholders as areas where the service model could improve or grow:

- Better understanding of protocols for outreach work, informed by youth work best practice, to support SUFOR staff safety and working relationships with partners.
- Refine the agreed approach for Youthlaw and partner organisations to manage and plan visits by SUFOR staff to residential care homes.
- Longer, collaborative planning phase with any new partners, before SUFOR staff interact with young people in care homes, to ensure robust relationships and clear mutual understanding of roles, responsibilities, capacity and constraints.
- More frequent training to workers about the Project and the Framework to ensure this knowledge stays front of mind in busy work environments with high staff turnover.
- Training to Magistrates in the region to ensure they understand the experience of young people who have been in OOHC (e.g. trauma and impacts on cognitive development).

- Reduced targets for service delivery, focusing instead on high intensity service to meet the needs of clients.
- Promote the Project further, including via support coordinators for young people who have an NDIS plan. This is particularly important for reaching young people who do not engage with partner organisations like Better Futures.

2.5.2 Engaging young people

Challenges

Stakeholders and SUFOR staff noted a variety of issues that can make it difficult to engage with and secure the trust of young people in OOHHC. Challenges included:

- High staff turnover in residential care homes meant that workers who could refer young people to SUFOR were not always aware of the project and the help it offers. High staff turnover also made it challenging for the Project to support residential care staff capability to recognise legal issues.
- Young people in residential care have typically experienced substantial trauma, which is compounded by ongoing instability, with frequent upheavals and little sense of security. Chaotic behaviour and absence from placement are common. Young people often miss appointments and/or their cognitive capacity to engage with legal help varies with their circumstances (e.g. due to crisis, substance use).

“... it's just a really difficult situation... There's no way a kid should ever be in a group home. In those group homes, you've got staff coming and going. Across the week you might have however many different staff and some of those might be agency staff and [the young person] might see them only once. How can a child be raised and parented in that environment?” – SUFOR staff

Enablers

The following were identified as factors that supported engagement between SUFOR staff and young people in OOHHC:

- Carers and case managers having strong relationships with clients, making referrals to the Project and being a trusted bridge between clients and SUFOR staff
- SUFOR staff being approachable, caring, genuine and communicating clearly
- Flexible meeting arrangements - SUFOR staff meeting young people in youth-friendly locations and rescheduling appointments with young people as many times as needed
- Case managers participating in meetings between young people and SUFOR staff helping ensure young people understood the process and information
- Older youth with greater maturity and more urgent/imminent needs related to leaving care being able to access the service via the local Better Futures providers.

“The fact that they know that we've got a relationship with [SUFOR lawyers]... helps. I can then say to them, ‘I know this lady who's a lawyer and she's part of this project and she works with young people. She's really friendly and she's not going to make things difficult for you, because she'll have an understanding of where you're at'... because there's that familiarity and that association, it sort of removes that threat that I think, that fear that can often spike for young people when they hear the word ‘lawyer’... there's a safety to then expose themselves and be open and honest and feel supported.” – Partner organisation staff

"It's just making it no matter how or what they do, that you're enthusiastic and you're available... it's the very least I think you have to do when you're servicing these kids so you're not another person or another organisation saying, 'oh well, too bad, because you stuffed up.' Like how many of those organisations are stuffing up in their dealings with the young person?" – SUFOR staff

"I think they do a really good job. They don't present as fancy lawyers. They present as normal people and that's what our kids love – that they're just someone trying to help them, and they can see they're authentic, they're genuine." – Partner organisation staff

"Referral pathways were strongest where young people had workers [like] a Better Futures worker or a case manager who'd been working with that young person for a long time, so they had the continuity. And some young people just don't have that. And they're the young people that are harder to reach because they don't have a worker who is there and constant for them, who can then facilitate the referrals and build the relationships with other services like our own." – SUFOR staff

"The most successful engagements have been with people on the verge of leaving care, because their needs are quite immediate.... it's very easy to say to the Department, 'you're meant to be doing this, this and this, you've done nothing about it.' The young person is quite engaged and the Better Futures workers are very engaged too. So you've got a united front between the three main players being us, Better Futures and the young person," – SUFOR staff

2.5.3 Partnering

The service model for the project was revised in collaboration with key project partners in a workshop in mid-2023. The roles of the SUFOR youth advocate and lawyers were refined and new methods of collaboration with out-of-home care providers were agreed (see section 1.1). The findings in this section focus on the current partnership model.

Challenges

SUFOR staff and partner organisation staff continue to work through some challenges toward effective partnering, including:

- High levels of care staff turnover, impacting relationship building, project awareness, capability building, buy-in and continuity
- Crisis-driven environment of residential care can leave little time for engaging with the Project
- Responsibility for managing the project at one partner organisation changed frequently, resulting in some inconsistency in engagement and promotion of the work internally

"I think you're just trying to get through the day on the ground. I don't think there's time for those individual workers... it's such a complex area of work, just trying to... deal with the latest crisis. So piling extra work on I think, is how [engaging with SUFOR] would [sometimes] have been viewed... [Engagement] would have had to have been directed from above and I don't think that ever happened." – SUFOR staff

Enablers

- Monthly co-location / outposts of lawyers at partner organisations has strengthened familiarity, collaboration and trust

- Sustained presence within the OOHC system has supported understanding of, and trust in, the Project and its staff
- Revisions to the service model and clearer, more focused areas of work for the SUFOR lawyers (i.e. lawyers not involved in advocating on day-to-day care matters)
- Developing trusted relationships with workers and providers before working with clients.

“We learned through one another’s advocacy. Being able to see what’s possible through collaborating together to try and shift the dial for some of these kids – it’s been a really lovely thing to be a part of.”

– SUFOR staff

SUFOR staff noted that because young people are often difficult to reach, the Project evolved to operate similarly to a health justice partnership²⁷.

2.6 What did stakeholders think should be changed about the system?

This section presents the reflections that stakeholders who participated in the evaluation shared about the child protection system and their recommendations for change.

The recommendations have not been tested across stakeholder groups, nor has their feasibility been assessed. These steps are beyond the scope of this evaluation.

These recommendations are grouped according to stages in a young person’s care journey.

Preceding the recommendations are a selection of quotes from interviews that illustrate some of the key systemic issues that prompted the recommendations.

2.6.1 Key systemic issues identified by SUFOR staff and key stakeholders

“It’s a job where you’ve got the most damaged kids and probably the least experienced and qualified [residential care] staff.” – SUFOR staff

“I think we make often a lot of decisions, where it is not planned – a young person needs to move because it’s convenient or they pose less risk, or they make a broader system change. I think that if they were consulted and... could just have some security that they just couldn’t be moved at any minute, that would be ideal. It doesn’t happen though. I just think – one day you wake up and you can be told that morning, no idea, and the end of that day you’re somewhere else, you lose everything, you have to start again, maybe school, everything. And that’s how quick it can happen... And you put a lot of people, traumatised, complex young people together, who have no connection, then trying to make everyone live harmoniously is really difficult as well.” – Carer

“I know we have funding restraints, but four kids in a house does not work. We’ve had kids come in that have no criminal history and they’re put into houses and we try to push back on the department around why it’s not safe, why we shouldn’t have this mix [of young people]. But at the end of the day, sometimes it was like ‘we fund these houses and you’re taking them’... And I’ve got a perfect

²⁷ “Health justice partnerships provide integrated health and legal care for individual clients. They build the capability of health and legal practitioners and services to provide more holistic person-centred care. They also advocate for change which improves the health and wellbeing of communities.” [Health Justice Australia](#), accessed 4 August 2025.

example, a 16-year-old [who when living at home] kept to herself, didn't get into anything criminal, drugs, sex. She's just moved into the residential care system and now... she's jumping on roofs at resi, swearing at staff. This isn't the girl that I had for the two years [before resi]." – Carer

"All the forms that they're meant to do, all the care planning or team meetings that are meant to happen... You've got legislation, you've got rules, you've got regulations, but what you haven't got, is in practice, anyone doing it. No one seems to actually be checking and insisting that this stuff be done." – SUFOR staff

"...kids in residential care, they move around so frequently and not all case managers are on the ball and things get missed. Sometimes we're still chasing birth certificates at 16 and that should have been ticked off years ago." – Carer

"I was working with young people who didn't know where they're going next week. And they might not know whether they've got a house until two days before they leave on their 18th birthday." – SUFOR staff

"At a management level there is a pretty good knowledge and understanding of the Framework²⁸, but those people are not the actual people on the ground working with the children and following the processes that might result in the police being called to attend a care home." – SUFOR staff

"Child Protection are impenetrable. If you've got to find out who to escalate to... the common thing is, they just don't respond... [You ask for] this person's manager, and the response is 'oh, just send it through and we'll direct it.' That's another reason why it's resource intensive... I will have to do to that 10 to 15 times." – SUFOR staff

"The child is confused because they think, 'oh, I've got a lawyer. I've got my criminal lawyer' or 'I've got my child protection lawyer.' But the criminal or child protection lawyers aren't legally aided to do any of that extra stuff we are... It's really confusing to them. [They think] 'oh, but you are my child protection lawyer, why can't you write to the department and tell them that no one is doing anything about my care leaving planning and that I don't have anywhere to go when I turn 18 and that I really need some mental health support, but I don't even know who my case manager is.'" – SUFOR staff

2.6.2 Ideas for systemic change from SUFOR staff and key stakeholders

Stakeholders had valuable, practice informed ideas and recommendations for changes to the child protection system. Youthlaw will use these stakeholder reflections to consult with key partners and other organisations (including the Commission for Children and Young People) to develop its organisational policy platform and inform future systemic advocacy. These recommendations should not be seen as endorsed by Youthlaw as an organisational position at this time.

The most frequently proposed change was to remove the current system of residential care homes, which were viewed as unsuitable environments for traumatised young people that typically create

²⁸ Framework to reduce criminalisation of young people in residential care.

further trauma and harm. Stakeholders acknowledged that abolition of residential care homes was unlikely but would be ideal if better care and more early intervention could be funded.

Prevention and early intervention

- **There should be greater investment in prevention and early intervention work with vulnerable families.**

During care

- **Independent non-legal advocates for young people in care.** There should be a person (separate from Child Protection and from contracted care organisations), who advocates for the young person throughout their time in care and works to hold all duty bearers to account, wherever the young person is placed.
- **Maximum of two young people per residential care home.** Care homes should contain one or two beds.
- **Timely leaving care planning.** Planning should commence at 15 years and 9 months as per guidelines, to provide young people certainty long before they turn 18. Care planning should actively include the young person in decision making.
- **Improve residential care workforce.** Better training (especially regarding the Framework) and conditions to support quality care and staff retention. Consistent placement at homes to enable relationships with young people and more therapeutic care. The minimum qualification requirement to be lifted (e.g. social work degree; see below.)
- **Specialist services embedded in residential care.** Specialists including psychologists, social workers, education specialists, occupational therapists, etc., working within care homes (either as carers or specialist supports) to provide accessible, expert support to better meet the needs of young people. Legal support to be part of this, particularly to provide information to ensure young people understand how their rights and responsibilities will change when they turn 18 and are legally adults.
- **Continuity in legal representation through restructured legal aid.** Funding model that enables a trusted relationship to be built with a legal representative who can assist with all a young person's legal issues (i.e. a lawyer allocated to assist with criminal matters can also help with other identified legal issues).
- **Professional foster care model.**²⁹ Provide a living wage to foster carers to increase available placements that provide full-time care and to improve quality of care. Include compulsory training in caring for trauma-affected young people, young people with disabilities, etc.
- **Greater transparency and responsiveness from Child Protection.** Implement/enforce processes to elevate voice of the child in decision making.

Transitioning/exiting care

- **Transitional / step-down model for care leavers.** Provide high intensity support in the first year, reducing support across three years post-care, for those who want it. This would include supported accommodation options where needed.
- **Housing**
 - Supported accommodation or lead tenant services as needed, for a period after residential care
 - Affordable housing options provided/prioritised for care leavers

²⁹ E.g. [Treatment Foster Care Model](#) run by OzChild (accessed 5 August 2025).

Other

- **Strategic litigation.** A class action for negligence of the government in relation to child protection. There is much legislation and frameworks not complied with, and young people in care suffering harm as a result.
- **Implement all existing recommendations.** Including those in the Systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system (Commission for children and young people); Yoorook Justice Commission.

3 Conclusion

3.1 Reach

The Project delivered **335 legal services** to **59 young people**. Average client age was 19.8 years and average number of services per client was 3.8.

It was possible to compare some client demographic details with statewide data on the average monthly residential care population in Victoria (2018 – 2020)³⁰. The following observations are made, noting that it is not known how closely the demographics of young people in care in the Grampians region match those statewide.

- 51% identified as female and 49% identified as male. This **gender** balance is the opposite of what is reflected in statewide demographic data on children in care, where 44% identify as female and 55% male (2018 – 2020). This suggests that the Project may have been more effective at engaging females than males.
- Among all young people assisted by the Project, 14% identified as **Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander**, while statewide data shows that 23% of all young people in care identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. This suggests there may be barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islanders to access this service.

Information and legal advice accounted for just over half of the services provided to clients (39% and 17% respectively) and the most common issues clients were assisted with were child protection and legal rights and responsibilities.

3.2 Effectiveness – Young people

The key aim of the project is to reduce criminalisation of vulnerable young people and improve their knowledge and confidence to assert their legal rights. As described in the Project's ToC, this is achieved when young people better understand their rights, responsibilities and options (including those detailed in the Charter for Children in Out of Home Care, and rights regarding specific areas of law relevant for individual young people, such as child protection, employment, and criminal matters); and when they know how to access free legal services and feel confident to do so. The ToC also notes that key to engaging young people to achieve these outcomes, is that they feel supported, heard and respected in all interactions with SUFOR staff. All of these factors together, are posited to lead to young people participating more in decisions that affect them and having their legal issues addressed. The ToC describes these outcomes as contributing to reduced victimisation and criminalisation of young people in OOHC (see discussion below).

The evaluation findings show that the Project successfully achieved these outcomes for young people, both through direct assistance and through secondary consultations to carers. Educating young people about their rights and helping them understand how their rights can and should be upheld was found to be a highly valued outcome, particularly for young people transitioning out of care or who have criminal matters. Young people described feeling listened to and gaining greater

³⁰ Table 14, Commission for Children and Young People, [Out of sight: systemic inquiry into children and young people who are absent or missing from residential care](#) (Melbourne: Commission for Children and Young People, 2021). Accessed 6 August 2025.

understanding and confidence through support provided by SUFOR staff. A major benefit of the Project was found to be the advocacy conducted on behalf of young people, which secured their access to supports, entitlements and services, particularly from Child Protection. Resolution of legal issues, including therapeutic outcomes in criminal matters, was also found to be a highly valued achievement of the Project for young people.

3.3 Effectiveness – Carers

The evaluation found that the Project was effective at building carer knowledge of the rights and entitlements of young people living in OOHC. Secondary consultations were the main mechanism for this capability uplift, supported by education sessions at partner organisations, facilitated monthly operations group meetings for partner staff and informal chats between carers and SUFOR lawyers on days the lawyers worked at partner organisation offices. It is important to note that engagement with the Project among partner organisations varied (e.g., in seeking secondary consultations and making referrals), and consequently, so did the Project's impact on their staff. For example, information and training about legal health checks has led to this becoming an embedded part of one partner organisation's intake process, while others were unaware of the tool.

Similarly, the findings show that the Project was effective at increasing the confidence of partner organisation staff to advocate for young people's rights and access to supports and services (again, corresponding to their level of engagement). For example, carer confidence was strengthened when SUFOR lawyers confirmed their understanding of Child Protection procedures and young people's entitlements. Confidence was especially strengthened among partner organisation staff who collaborated closely with SUFOR staff, with legal leverage effectively securing responses and actions from Child Protection.

3.4 Impact – On criminalisation, victimisation, leaving care

The evaluation found that the Project reduced **criminalisation** among young people who received direct legal assistance in criminal matters, by securing therapeutic outcomes such as diversion and cautions, which lower the risk of reoffending and further justice involvement.

The evaluation also received evidence that training and secondary consultations by SUFOR staff had helped increase carer understanding of the Framework to Reduce Criminalisation of Young People in Residential Care. Stakeholders commonly agreed that a better understanding of the Framework promotes adherence to its principles, with some reporting observed practice improvements (such as fewer property damage charges against young people) that they partly attributed to the Project.

The evaluation findings indicate that the Project's capacity to reduce victimisation of young people in care is limited. Key activities – including informing young people of their rights, supporting intervention order processes, and strengthening carers' protective skills – were seen as valuable by staff and stakeholders, but of limited impact in the face of the substantial risks and vulnerabilities created by the chaotic and high-risk nature of residential care settings.

Support for **care leavers** and young people who have exited care was found to be a highly valued aspect of the Project. Many stakeholders reported that often, timely care leaving planning does not

occur, but SUFOR staff have been able to get results in instances where carers have not been successful despite best efforts. Key enabling factors for achieving good outcomes for care leavers were identified, including greater engagement by older young people with urgent needs, case managers or Better Future workers having strong relationships with the young person and persistence and independence of SUFOR staff.

3.5 Stakeholder recommendations for systems change

Stakeholders provided a range of suggestions for changes to improve the OOHC system. The most common suggestion was to do away with the current form of residential care homes altogether, which were seen as often creating more harm than good. Acknowledging this was unlikely, other recommendations to improve the current system included:

- Independent non-legal advocates for young people in care
- Maximum of two young people per residential care home
- Strengthening the residential care workforce
- Embedding specialist services in residential care homes
- Professional foster care model
- Greater transparency and responsiveness from Child Protection
- Transitional / step-down model for care leavers

3.6 Key learnings about the service model

3.6.1 Building and sustaining relationships with services and frontline staff takes time and is critical to success

This project introduced and trialled new ways of working, asking the local out of home care sector to trust legal services in a way that has not been standard practice, including asking workers to work alongside lawyers, be introspective about their own practice and reimagine what might be possible for children in care settings. A key learning is that building trust, collaborative relationships and working practices between the Project and its partners is vital foundational work that can take considerable time.

Challenges to building strong collaborative relationships included:

- high staff attrition rates within the sector and personnel changes (of managers and workers)
- high-level buy-in and support from management and executive level staff within partner organisations, government and local services did not guarantee buy-in or support from workers on the ground.

These factors impeded trust and relationship building, which in turn reduced the amount of contact project lawyers were able to have with young people onsite in residential care settings. Consequently, access remained an ongoing challenge for Project lawyers, limiting their ability to build relationships with young people and support education and prevention initiatives to the extent originally planned.

Investing sufficient time for all stakeholders to build relationships and understand each other's unique roles, ethical frameworks and the value each can provide to young people in out of home care settings is critical for this model to succeed. The project experience highlights the need for any similar

future projects to ensure sufficient time is allowed for important and ongoing relationship building work. Project outcomes should include those that demonstrate the progress made in partnership and stakeholder relationships, as well as those achieved for the young people themselves.

Collaboration between partners continues to grow. Monthly co-location of lawyers at partner organisations and the responsiveness of SUFOR staff to secondary consultation requests have been key to strengthening collaboration and trust.

3.6.2 A flexible, iterative approach supported development of an appropriate service model

Strategic, practice informed and collaboratively designed adjustments to the service model were found to strengthen the appropriateness and effectiveness of the Project. Extending assistance beyond young people living in residential care (to include children in foster care, kinship care, young care leavers and those professionals who support them) enabled the Project to help care leavers and young people who had exited care – a cohort with urgent and often unmet needs. Moving the focus of lawyer involvement away from day-to-day care matters to issues such as placement, family reconciliation, or safety, helped smooth and strengthen relationships with partner organisations. The revised model also provided greater clarity about the types of issues the Project could assist with.

3.6.3 Addressing engagement barriers for young people

As was anticipated, **engaging young people** was challenging. Trauma experienced by young people – in and prior to OOHC – affects them in multiple ways, including their cognitive capacity, stress levels, time management and willingness or ability to form trusting relationships, which in turn affects their ability to understand legal information and engage effectively with legal support. Referrals from trusted carers and their vouching for SUFOR staff helped bridge trust with the Project. Secondary consultations enabled young people to receive legal information from people they are most likely to understand and listen to – carers they have built trust with.

3.6.4 Elements of an effective service model

Through this three-year Project, and the flexible, iterative approach taken to trialling and refining the service model, Youthlaw has been able to identify numerous elements that are key to effectively supporting young people who are currently receiving support from child protection services and/or have exited care.

Key elements that support effectiveness include:

- A significant (minimum six month) collaborative planning phase with any new partners, to ensure robust relationships and clear mutual understanding of roles, responsibilities, capacity and constraints.
- Clear protocols for managing and planning visits by legal staff to residential care homes and undertaking other outreach, which are informed by youth work best practice. These should be agreed by a legal service and partner organisations as part of the planning phase.
- Regular co-location / outposts of lawyers at partner organisations to build trust, relationships, and mutual understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities.
- Providing training and secondary consultations for carers is important for relationship building, to improve carers' understanding of young peoples' legal rights and responsibilities, and enable them to support young people with legal issues.

- It is essential to employ legal staff with strong expertise in the criminal and civil issues that are experienced by young people who have exited care.
- It is essential to employ staff with the ability to build connection and trust with a vulnerable cohort that has experienced significant upheaval and may not have a high level of trust in service providers or the legal system.

3.7 Closing remarks

Project staff and stakeholders unanimously supported the continuation of services provided by the Project. Within the current OOHC system, the Project's flexible support and independent advocacy were viewed as vital contributions that improve the help received by some of the state's most vulnerable young people.

4 Methodology

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach for data collection; primarily qualitative, with use of some quantitative survey data collected by the project.

4.1 Data collection methods

4.1.1 Stakeholder interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 stakeholders:

- Youthlaw
 - Youth lawyers x 2
 - Youth advocate x 1
 - Project Manager x 1
- Partner agency staff and local sector experts
 - Case managers x 2
 - Better Futures workers x 2
 - Managers / Team leaders x 3
 - Sector expert x 1

Interviews were conducted by videoconference and took approximately 60 minutes for Youthlaw staff and 30 – 40 minutes for other stakeholders. With stakeholder permission, interviews were recorded and transcribed in full to support detailed analysis. Permission was obtained from stakeholders to use anonymised quotes from their interviews in this report.

4.1.2 Service delivery data

A de-identified data spreadsheet, with information about legal services delivered, demographic details of clients receiving services, and the service outcomes, was provided to the evaluator for analysis. Descriptive statistics were prepared using Excel. While reviewing the draft evaluation report, Youthlaw identified that there were errors in the data set initially shared with the evaluator. Youthlaw updated the summary statistics in this report using the correct data set and shared the revised data set with the evaluator to check and validate the revised statistics.

4.1.3 Client feedback

The evaluator reviewed and analysed de-identified feedback collected from clients by Youthlaw staff during May and June 2025. Short feedback surveys were designed to collect feedback about the key areas of change the project seeks to influence (e.g. knowledge and understanding, feeling supported, confidence, etc.) as well as about young people's views of the value of the project. The survey design was informed by feedback from youth consultants with lived experience of OOHHC.

Feedback was collected from 7 clients (12% of the 59 clients) assisted by the project.

4.1.4 Case stories

Throughout the pilot, project staff developed case stories that demonstrate the ways that young people are supported by the Project and a range of positive outcomes experienced as a result. The case studies were analysed and compared to the intended outcomes outlined in the project's ToC in order to test its validity.

4.1.5 Document review

The evaluator reviewed the following documents for information about how the pilot was implemented and evolved over time:

- Annual Reports to funders (2023, 2024 and 2025)
- Presentation to the Centre For Excellence in Child and Family Welfare's philanthropic funders network (2025)
- SUFOR 6-month evaluation report

4.2 Data analysis

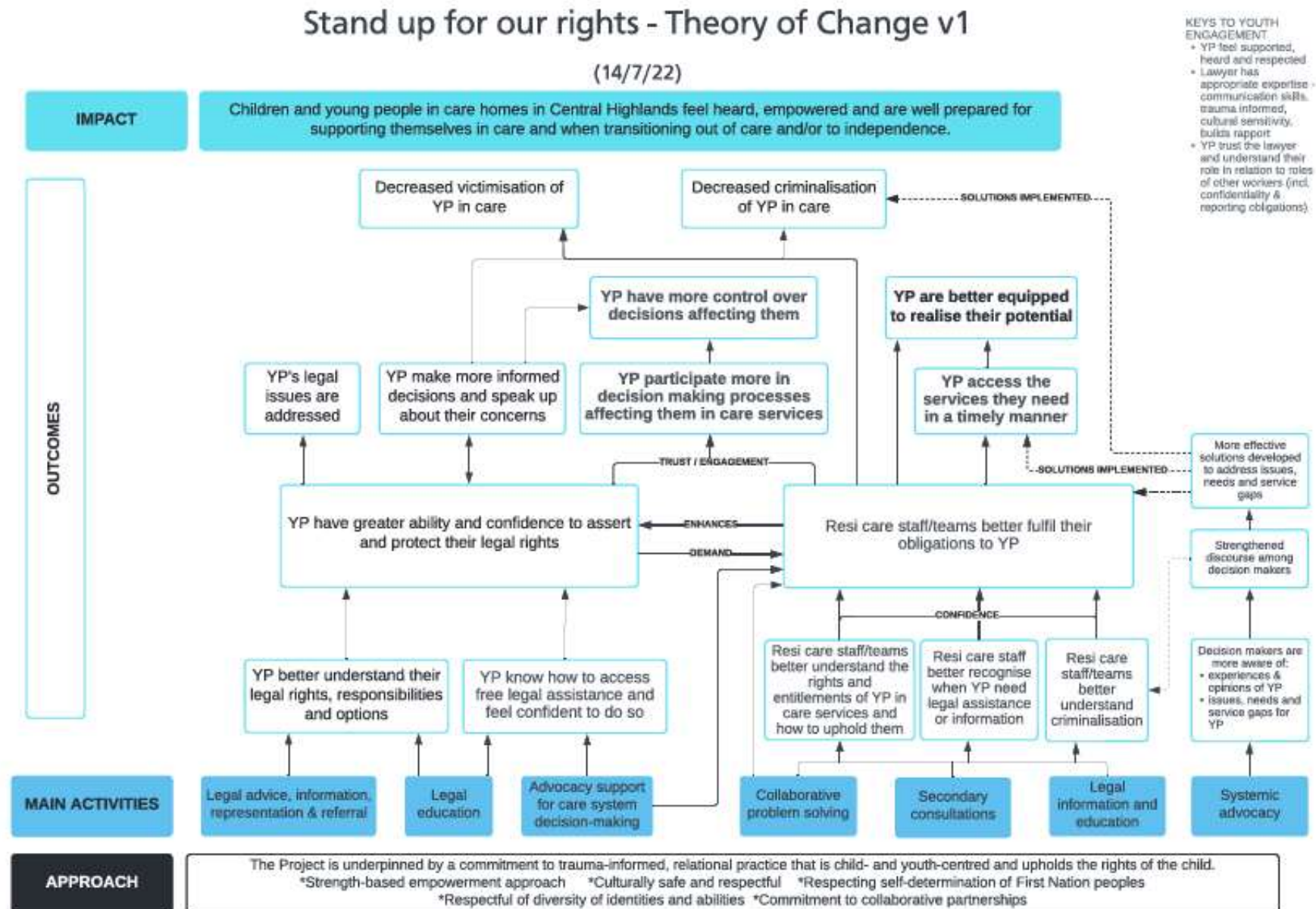
Interview data were analysed for themes using NVivo 15 (specialist qualitative data analysis software). Survey data were analysed using Microsoft Excel to produce descriptive statistics.

4.3 Reporting

The evaluator prepared a draft evaluation report which was shared with Youthlaw for review. A feedback meeting was convened for Youthlaw staff to discuss and validate the findings with the evaluator. Feedback was incorporated into the final version of this report.

5 Appendix

Appendix A – Theory of Change (July 2022)



Appendix B – Legal health check



youthlaw

At Ballarat Community Health



rosie@youthlaw.asn.au 0493 380 261

The Youth Lawyer can help with a range of problems. Use this checklist to see if a referral to the Youth Lawyer is necessary.

NAME	✓	✗
Do you have debt or outstanding fines? EG. phone account, payday loan, or credit card, on-the-spot fines or transport fines?	☐	☐
Have you been mistreated by Police? EG. illegally strip searched, detained or harassed	☐	☐
Do you have a problem with Centrelink? EG. owe a debt to Centrelink, charged with fraud	☐	☐
Do you have problems at work or school? EG. sacked, underpaid, bullied, suspended/excluded or need to make a complaint	☐	☐
Have you been charged with a criminal offence? EG. assault, breach of an Intervention Order, theft, property damage, drug offences or graffiti	☐	☐
Do you have family or relationship problems? EG. family breakdown, family violence, parenting, child support, age of consent or sexting	☐	☐
Are you a victim of crime? EG. domestic violence, physical or sexual assault	☐	☐
Do you have any driving related problems? EG. hoon driving, demerit points, motor vehicle accident or insurance	☐	☐
Do you have any issues online? EG. social media, cyber-bullying, passwords, scams, sexting	☐	☐
Do you feel discriminated against? EG. at school, work, home, public service or in a sporting team	☐	☐
Do you have any questions or concerns about living in care? EG. Child Protection including placement decisions, problems with other young people or adults, police involvement	☐	☐

