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| Better Futures community connections  Practice advice |
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Contents

[Purpose 1](#_Toc62486292)

[Audience 1](#_Toc62486293)

[Introduction 2](#_Toc62486294)

[Community Connections - the building blocks 2](#_Toc62486295)

[Key principles of the Community Connections service offer 2](#_Toc62486296)

[The Community Connector role 3](#_Toc62486297)

[Stakeholders 4](#_Toc62486298)

[The role of the Better Futures worker and the Community Connections service offer 5](#_Toc62486299)

[Referral to Community Connections 5](#_Toc62486300)

[When should a Community Connections referral be made? 5](#_Toc62486301)

[Who is responsible for making a Community Connections referral? 6](#_Toc62486302)

[Referral process 6](#_Toc62486303)

[Reporting requirements 6](#_Toc62486304)

[Outcomes 7](#_Toc62486305)

# Purpose

Better Futures is a new service and practice model designed to improve outcomes for young people transitioning from care to supported independence, up to the age of 21 years. It is guided by a Better Futures (Advantaged Thinking) practice framework and support is tailored to meet the individual needs of young people.

The Community Connections service offer is a key component of the Better Futures model and aims to build supportive networks, pathways and connections for young people in their communities. This advice sets out practice expectations of Better Futures providers and other stakeholders to support the delivery of the Community Connections service offer.

# Audience

Better Futures Community Connections providers, Better Futures workers, the Department of Health and Human Services (the department) child protection case managers, case managers delivering contracted case management in community service organisations, and case managers in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), Agency Performance and System Support (APSS) advisors, Population Health and Community Wellbeing advisors, and other organisations working with young people.

# Introduction

Better Futures is a new way of supporting care leavers. Better Futures engages with young people and their support networks, including case managers and care teams early in the young person’s transition from care, across five service offers; housing and living skills; education; employment; health and wellbeing and community connections. Young people are eligible for Better Futures support from 15 years and 9 months until their 21st birthday.

The Better Futures Community Connections service offer builds access to new pathways, networks and resources within the community, so that young people can develop enabling, meaningful and sustained connections that will help them achieve their goals and support their transition to independence.

Community Connections focusses on strengthening young people’s social capital, with an emphasis on building support networks, and providing opportunities for young people to participate in civic, social, economic and cultural life. To achieve this the Community Connections service offer leverages existing local partnerships, and develops new relationships within the community spanning government, business, services, community and philanthropy. This approach may also include matching young people with a mentor based on their interests, goals and aspirations.

# Community Connections - the building blocks

Effective delivery of the Community Connections service offer sees workers drawing on several practice approaches, including:

* **Advantaged Thinking:** developing and investing in young people’s skills, talents and capabilities and enabling young people to thrive.
* **harnessing community effort:** leveraging key partnerships across local communities, businesses, services, government and philanthropic organisations to provide young people with the opportunities, networks and resources they need to build sustainable livelihoods.
* **a focus on place**: recognising that young people and their communities are interrelated and that the places where young people live, learn, work and play have an important role in shaping their health and wellbeing[[1]](#footnote-1).
* **culturally informed responses:** building on the work delivered by ACCOs to support Aboriginal young people’s self-determination and cultural development across all areas of their life.

For further information, please refer to the [Better Futures Advantaged Thinking Practice Framework](https://www.bsl.org.au/services/youth/better-futures/) <https://www.bsl.org.au/services/youth/better-futures>

# Key principles of the Community Connections service offer

A Community Connections service offer response will vary according to the needs of each young person, their existing connection to culture and community, their transition goals, and the community they reside in. Communities are diverse and dynamic and as such working in place occurs in different ways across different communities.

Notwithstanding the requirement for flexibility in the way in which this service offer is delivered, there are some key principles that apply in all circumstances.

Key principles include:

* the voice and expertise of young people should inform the design, implementation and delivery of a Community Connections service offer; young people are given opportunities to meaningfully participate in the design of services and responses that affect them.
* the Community Connections service offer delivered by providers may vary depending on the needs of young people in the local area, service demand, local opportunities and area arrangements.
* mentoring is an integral element of the Community Connections service offer and will remain a service option for young people transitioning from care.
* where there are multiple providers servicing the same area/s, providers are encouraged to collaborate and build strong partnerships to develop complementary service offers.
* providers are encouraged to develop and deliver new and innovative mentoring models outside of the traditional one-to-one model, this includes group mentoring and Circles of Support models[[2]](#footnote-2).
* the use of different communication and engagement platforms to effectively communicate what is being achieved and how community can get involved, and to ensure stakeholders are kept informed and engaged as the Community Connections service offer evolves.
* where possible, providers should consider co-location opportunities that will increase awareness and engagement with the community and create a greater understanding of young people’s talents and potential.

# The Community Connector role

Community Connectors are people who build and seek out partnerships and networks within and across local communities to leverage community investment and strengthen young people’s social capital and community connectedness.

Community Connectors do not provide case work, as this role sits with the Better Futures worker or the young person’s case manager if the young person is in care.

Key functions and responsibilities for this role include:

**Harnessing community effort:**

* bringing together community stakeholders to strengthen and create new opportunities and pathways for young people transitioning from care (stakeholders may include all levels of government, local businesses and employers, education and employment providers, philanthropic organisations, community groups and services, sporting and recreation)
* mapping and identifying existing stakeholders, services and opportunities available to young people, as well as addressing the structural barriers and gaps in opportunities for young people
* using local data, knowledge and expertise to inform the local Community Connections service offer and key activities
* fostering community ownership of issues confronting young people transitioning from care to drive local solutions (developed by community, for community)
* promoting young people as assets within the local area and raise awareness about what young people and community can achieve together.

**Community engagement and capacity building:**

* leveraging existing local networks and resources, and brokering new relationships within all aspects of the community (government, business, philanthropic) to create new pathways and opportunities for young people
* sharing local expertise, knowledge and resources with Better Futures workers to assist them with matching a young person to opportunities based on their goals, interests and strengths
* providing secondary consultation to Better Futures workers about opportunities and resources available to young people - the level of secondary consultation and support offered is dependent on the circumstances and needs of the young person, the capacity of the Community Connector, and local area arrangements
* strengthening young people’s social capital by creating connections and opportunities beyond the service system, including connections with mentors, peers, elders, community groups, sporting clubs, rotary, local businesses and neighbourhood houses (i.e. minimising the number of paid workers and increasing the number of unpaid workers in a young person’s life)
* using various communication and engagement platforms to communicate young people’s achievements to the community, helping communities to value young people as contributing members of the community
* sharing learnings, resources and practice by contributing to the Better Futures Communities of Practice (CoP), attending Better Futures local governance meetings and linking with similar initiatives.

**Mentoring:**

* sourcing opportunities to connect young people to community mentors who can help them explore their personal and professional aspirations and provide them with guidance, support and encouragement in line with their identified goals
* developing and maintaining communication and engagement platforms to target community volunteers and key stakeholders for mentoring opportunities
* developing and delivering innovative practices outside of the traditional one-to-one mentoring model, including group mentoring and circles of support
* recruiting, training and supporting volunteer mentors who have broad life experiences, from community, business, philanthropy and other key partners
* facilitating, monitoring and reviewing the mentoring match process between the young people and their mentors
* supporting mentors to connect with young people in social and recreational activities that contribute to a young person’s self-esteem, resilience, agency, health and wellbeing goals
* developing and maintaining networks with key community partners including local businesses, local government, community organisations and services and other key stakeholders.

# Stakeholders

Key stakeholders and partnerships may include:

* young people
* other Community Connectors and Better Futures providers
* ACCOs
* community groups (for example arts, theatre, sporting and recreation, rotary)
* youth, multicultural and disability specific organisations
* LGBTI support services
* local government
* child protection case managers and care services providers
* local businesses (retail, real estate agencies etc)
* philanthropic organisations
* education providers (TAFEs, Universities, local schools and training providers etc)
* Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs)
* local employers
* allied health and women’s health organisations
* neighbourhood Houses and Men’s Sheds
* population Health and Community Wellbeing teams (DHHS)
* other government departments
* Victoria Police.

# The role of the Better Futures worker and the Community Connections service offer

Better Futures workers provide flexible, tailored and holistic support to young people leaving care, engaging with their networks early in their transition from care and investing in their talents and aspirations to support their transition to independence. This includes identifying young people’s capabilities and interests to support young people’s individual goals and aspirations across five service offers; education, housing and living skills, health and wellbeing, employment and community connections.

Better Futures workers will continue to play a vital role in identifying, sourcing and connecting young people to opportunities in their community. This includes working with the whole community – including business, government, services and philanthropy – to create greater access to resources, networks and pathways for young people.

When a young person and the Better Futures worker identify that Community Connections support is required, the Better Futures worker is responsible for making a referral to Community Connections. The Community Connector then matches a young person to a mentor or facilitates a connection to a community service, resource or opportunity. This could include supporting a connection to a social or recreational activity such as a basketball club or a book club. The Better Futures worker and the Community Connector work collaboratively to support a young person with these connection/s.

Local Better Futures governance structures should ensure that the Community Connections service offer is embedded in local planning and practice. A strong working partnership between the Better Futures and Community Connections providers is essential to encourage the transfer and sharing of local knowledge and information, particularly surrounding local needs, gaps and opportunities available to young people. This includes setting up regular meetings and networking opportunities for Community Connectors and Better Futures workers.

# Referral to Community Connections

Young people are referred to Better Futures at 15 years and 9 months by their child protection case manager/contracted case manager/ Aboriginal Children Aboriginal Care (ACAC) case manager via the Client Relationship Information System/Service Providers (CRIS/SP). The Better Futures provider completes an initial assessment to determine the required Better Futures response, including whether Community Connections support is required.

## When should a Community Connections referral be made?

Community Connections referrals can be made when:

* a young person would like to be matched with a mentor (one-to-one and group mentoring); or
* a young person would like to be connected to a community service or resource and the Community Connector is required to facilitate this connection.

Please note, where a Better Futures provider is seeking information about local groups, resources and opportunities that exist in the community a CRISSP referral is not required. In these instances, the Better Futures worker is encouraged to contact their Community Connections provider directly and/or discuss their support needs at their local governance group meeting. The level of secondary consultation and support offered by a Community Connector will be dependent on the circumstances and needs of the young person, local area arrangements and the capacity of the provider.

## Who is responsible for making a Community Connections referral?

All referrals for Community Connections must come from the Better Futures worker; this is both for young people in care and post-care.

Referrals should be made by the Better Futures worker when a young person is assessed as requiring Community Connections support at any stage between 15 years and 9 months and 21 years of age.

## Referral process

The Better Futures worker:

* discusses a Community Connections referral with the young person, and obtains their consent to the referral
* sends a CRISSP referral to the relevant Community Connections provider, and attach all relevant documentation (for example the 15+ Care and Transition Plan and Cultural Plan)[[3]](#footnote-3)
* shares any other relevant information with the Community Connections provider including information regarding security alerts or safety risks.

The Community Connector:

* creates a new CRISSP client record and youth case for Community Connections (where a referral is made internally (i.e. a provider delivers both case work support and Community Connections) the provider should use their existing client record)
* accepts the CRISSP referral
* creates a CRISSP service provision record to reflect the Better Futures Community Connections service offer
* initiates contact with the referrer within five working days to advise of allocation and/or prioritisation processes
* records all Community Connections service activity in the CRISSP youth case
* records hours of service via the activity function in CRISSP – (note this is an optional function for Community Connectors who wish to track hours of support provided to young people)
* seeks any additional information from the Better Futures worker if required.

For more information on the Better Futures CRISSP referral and allocation process, refer to the [Better Futures Eligibility and Referral Practice Advice](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/better-futures-eligibility-and-referral-practice-advice) <<https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/better-futures-eligibility-and-referral-practice-advice>> and the [Better Futures Allocation and Prioritisation Practice Advice](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/better-futures-allocation-and-prioritisation-practice-advice) <<https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/better-futures-allocation-and-prioritisation-practice-advice>>.

# Reporting requirements

Community Connections providers are required to submit:

* an annual directions plan outlining planned objectives, priorities and activities by 31 July to their local APSS advisor
* an annual outcomes report detailing outcomes for young people as a result of the objectives, priorities and activities by 1 June to their local APSS advisor.

Community Connection providers must submit their annual directions plan and annual outcomes report to their local APSS advisor for departmental endorsement. Departmental endorsement is required by the APSS Manager or a nominated delegate determined by the local area. APSS advisors are required to [email a copy of the endorsed directions plan and the annual outcomes report to the department’s Children and Families Branch](mailto:childrenyouthfamilies@dhhs.vic.gov.au) <childrenyouthfamilies@dhhs.vic.gov.au>.

Please note, the department is currently developing state-wide reporting templates to reflect a greater focus on outcomes. An interim template for the annual directions plan is available for providers and can be accessed via their local APSS advisor. In the absence of a state-wide outcomes reporting template, providers are requested to submit their outcomes report using an interim template of their choice. In all instances, providers should contact their APSS advisor to discuss reporting requirements and local area arrangements.

It is recommended that:

* the directions plan be developed in consultation with Better Futures providers and where practicable, other key stakeholders, including local partnerships and governance group
* quarterly meetings occur between Community Connection providers and their APSS advisor to discuss local arrangements, reporting, progress against planned objectives and activities, key themes, challenges and opportunities.

Please note, that there are no Service Delivery Tracking (SDT) requirements associated with Community Connections.

# Outcomes

The below table details the short, medium and long term outcomes for Community Connections.

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| **Short term outcomes** | **Medium term outcomes** | **Long term outcomes** |
| Community Connectors work in partnership with Better Futures practitioners | Community Connectors maintain relationships with community organisations | Young people have improved education and employment outcomes |
| Community Connectors initiate and establish partnerships with community organisations | Young people have increased community engagement | Young people have improved physical and mental health |
| Young people have increased access to opportunities for community engagement and to resources and networks | Young people have increased social capital and wellbeing | Aboriginal young people are connected to kin, community and Culture. |
| Communities are empowered to support young people transitioning from care | Communities can identify and invest in opportunities for young people | Young people are valued community members |
|  |  | Local communities have increased investment and ownership of responses to young people transitioning from care |

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1. A departmental guide for place-based approaches, Department of Health and Human Services, December 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘[Inclusion Melbourne – Circles of Support’](https://inclusionmelbourne.org.au/projects/circles-of-support/) <https://inclusionmelbourne.org.au/projects/circles-of-support> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. where a Better Futures provider delivers both case work support and Community Connections, an internal CRISSP referral is still required for appropriate record keeping and data collection purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)