Lumenia

CHILD AND FAMILY FOCUS SA

# South Australia in Focus

## Child Protection and Out-of-Home Care Trends and Opportunities

November 2025

# Foreword

Child and Family Focus South Australia (CAFFSA) is pleased to present this report, a collaborative and data-driven exploration of South Australia's child protection and out-of-home care (OOHC) systems, drawing on the most reliable national datasets available. This work brings together multiple perspectives into a single framework that allows us to explore the functioning of our family support and child protection systems.

Now, more than ever, genuine partnership must be at the core of sector improvement. This report is the product of purposeful collaboration between CAFFSA, Lumenia and our government and community partners. We thank all who have contributed their expertise, insight, and lived experience to shape this work. Together, we are united in our commitment to building systems that are not only effective, but also equitable and compassionate, systems that place the wellbeing, safety and rights of children and families at their centre.

South Australia's children, young people, and families deserve support systems that are responsive, fair, culturally safe and able to adapt to evolving needs. By comparing our progress over time and with other jurisdictions through transparent, accessible data, we aim to identify where we are making real progress and where focused attention is required. The South Australian Child and Family Services Responsiveness Index provides a shared reference point to guide these conversations and drive informed decision-making.

We recognise the diversity, resilience, and strengths of communities across South Australia, and we acknowledge the vital contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and leaders in shaping a holistic vision for sector reform. Their voices, perspectives, and leadership are, and must continue to be, central to creating services that are culturally responsive and capable of addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in our child protection and OOHC system.

This report also stands as a reminder that behind every dataset and performance indicator is a child's life, a young person's pathway and a family's story. Measuring responsiveness is not an abstract exercise; it is a way of holding ourselves accountable for the timeliness, quality, and equity of the support that we as a sector and community provide. It is about making sure every decision we take is guided by the best available evidence, underpinned by a shared commitment meet the needs and aspirations of South Australian children, young people and their families.

**Leeanne Haddad**
Executive Director and Chair
Child and Family Focus SA

**Melissa Gibson**
Chief Executive Officer
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# Acknowledgements


### Acknowledgement of Country

Child and Family Focus SA acknowledge the traditional lands of the Kaurna people and acknowledge the Kaurna people as the custodians of the Adelaide region and the Greater Adelaide Plains. We pay our respects to Kaurna Elders past, present and emerging.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of land beyond Adelaide and the Adelaide Plains, and pay our respects to all Aboriginal Elders past, present and emerging.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the cultural authority of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues and are grateful for the cultural expertise that they represent.

### Acknowledgement of Contribution

The CAFFSA and Lumenia teams acknowledge the contributions of CAFFSA members and stakeholders to this report, including the expertise, cultural knowledge and guidance provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector leaders who shared their experiences, expertise and knowledge to collaboratively inform this report.


## Child and Family Focus South Australia

CAFFSA is the South Australian peak body for child safety and wellbeing and child protection, representing the needs of South Australian children, young people, families and the non-government, not-for-profit organisations who support them.

## Lumenia

Lumenia is a specialist consulting organisation providing economic analysis, evaluation and research services to the child and family sector across Australia, with a focus on evidence-based approaches and amplifying the voices of those with lived experience. Founded by experts with extensive sector experience, Lumenia is dedicated to challenging conventional practices and pioneering transformative approaches in child, family and community services.

## Suggested Citation

Child and Family Focus South Australia and Lumenia (2025). *South Australia in Focus: Family Support, Child Protection and Out-of-Home Care Trends and Opportunities*.

# Overview

## South Australian Child and Family Responsiveness Index

The **SA Child & Family Responsiveness Index** brings together 10 key indicators into one measure to show changes in overall system responsiveness 2017-24

**A Comparator Group** was constructed based on jurisdictions with demographic and socio-economic similarities to SA to enable comparison

**+5.3%**

**Change in SA system responsiveness since 2017** compared with **no change** nationally and **+3%** for Comparator Group. However, whilst trending in a positive direction, SA remains below national child and family responsiveness levels as of 2024

## Encouraging Signs

**40%** **SA children who are re-notified** following earlier child protection interventions. **SA re-notifications are at lower rates** than the comparator and national means, with trends improving since 2017

**1.9** **SA children taken into care per 1,000. Rates are declining** and are at similar levels to national means, but lower than the comparator group. The number of children being taken into care increased in most jurisdictions in 2024

**82%** **More child protection investigations in SA are completed with 90 days than in the comparator groups.** SA continues to improve investigation timeliness, with one third of investigations completed in 29 days

**$55m** **Recent investment commitments** of $55.2 million in initiatives for **family support and intensive family support services** over 5 years and an additional $4 million directed to targeted service areas (2023-24 State Budget)

**1,187** Additional families are being supported in 2024 through expansion of **Family Group Conferencing,** which have been shown to have over **90% success rates** in keeping children and families together

## Priorities for Action

**51** **children per 1,000 in OOHC exiting to sustained permanency.** SA children exiting to reunification are less likely to return to OOHC within 12 months than any other jurisdiction, yet SA has amongst the lowest rates of children exiting to permanency nationally

**The rate of infants (aged <1 year) taken into care per 1,000 infant population is high** compared with a rate of 6.5 children nationally. Reunification rates of infants (16% of SA) remain below the national average of 23%, and are an area of clear focus need

**83%** **The percentage of children in family-based care in SA is significantly lower** than the national result. There has been a marked rise in residential care with 57% growth since 2017, accounting for approximately 17% of all OOHC placements, the second highest proportion nationwide

**9.4** **The rate of overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC is high.** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be overrepresented in each stage of the child protection and OOHC system with overrepresentation being amplified at every stage.

## Towards A More Responsive System

- **Evidence-based innovation:** BetterStart linked data process enabling more robust measurement, recently established a positive return on investment in the Child and Family Support System
- **Reunification infrastructure potential:** Reunification Court and dedicated reunification services a leverage basis for scaling up reunification efforts
- **Early intervention coordination gaps:** Better coordination needed for families with unborn children
- **Carer support crisis:** Economic barriers and lack of support driving decline in foster care, kinship care expansion to keep children connected in family-based environments critical priority
- **Aboriginal self-determination pathway:** Systematic transfer to ACCOs and Aboriginal-led decision making essential to address over-representation
- **Unmet demand reality:** Despite major investments, large proportions of intensive family service referrals still cannot be served, highlighting the scale of family needs

# Glossary of Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| ABS | Australian Bureau of Statistics |
| ACCO | Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations |
| AIHW | Australian Institute of Health and Welfare |
| ATSICPP | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle |
| CAFFSA | Child and Family Focus South Australia |
| CAGR | Compound Annual Growth Rate |
| CALD | Culturally and Linguistically Diverse |
| CFFS | Child and Family Support System |
| DHS | Department of Human Services (SA) |
| DFV | domestic and family violence |
| DPC | The Department for Child Protection (SA) |
| FGC | Family Group Conferencing |
| IFS | Intensive Family Support |
| NGO | Non-government Organisation |
| OOHC | Out-of-home care |
| PIS | Protective Intervention Services |
| ROGS | Report of Government Services |
| SA | South Australia |
| SNAICC | Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care |
| SDM | Structured Decision Making (tools) |

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# Introduction

Responsive and effective systems of family support, child protection and out-of-home care (OOHC) are essential to the wellbeing of South Australia's children, young people, and families. Understanding how these systems perform over time and in relation to other jurisdictions is foundational to building better practice, informing policy reform and achieving better outcomes for those we serve across the child and family sector.

This report draws on publicly available national data, most notably from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Productivity Commission Report on Government Services (RoGS), coupled with consultation evidence, to provide a clear, evidence-based analysis of the responsiveness of South Australia's child and family sector. By presenting longitudinal and comparative insights, the report aims to provide an accessible picture of how South Australia's system is functioning across prevention, response, statutory child protection and OOHC domains.

The intended audience includes CAFFSA members, government agencies, service providers, community organisations and policy makers. Rather than an academic analysis, this report aims to synthesise performance information from extensive government datasets into insights that can inform policy dialogue, service planning and sector advocacy efforts. In this way, the report aims to provide an accessible and balanced assessment of South Australia's child protection and OOHC system responsiveness for the diverse stakeholder community working to improve outcomes for children and families.

The report is structured to:

- Illuminate key trends and system pressures;
- Highlight areas of strength and opportunities for improvement, and;
- Support sector-wide conversations about where investment, policy attention, and partnership can achieve the greatest impact.

The analysis recognises the diversity of the children, families and communities reflected in these data. Informed by consultation and sector input, our intention is to support transparent discussion**,** acknowledging our progress, confronting our challenges and shaping a collective vision for more responsive, equitable and effective services for all South Australians.

We hope this report provides a useful tool for agencies, practitioners, policymakers and advocates working together toward a stronger, more resilient support, care and protection system.

# The South Australian Context

## Demographic and socio-economic indicators

South Australia's demographic and socio-economic profile profoundly shapes the landscape for family and child services, influencing strategies, priorities and resources needed for effective support across family support, child protection, OOHC and reunification. Further details can be found in Appendix A.

The Child Development Council (2024) report unique circumstances that bring South Australian differences into sharper focus. Over a quarter (26%) of children and young people aged under 20 live in the most disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances, well above the national average of 19.4%, while 17% of children under 18 live with disability, compared to 13% nationally. Almost 40% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in South Australia are under 18, reflecting the critical importance of culturally safe, co-designed child and family services. Additionally, over 23% of South Australians are born overseas, highlighting the need for culturally responsive approaches in all levels of child and family services.

While 78% of children reside in metropolitan Adelaide, this concentration risks masking service gaps in regional and remote areas. Housing instability presents significant challenges, with child homelessness rates (57.0 per 10,000 children) significantly exceeding the national average (49.9 per 10,000). South Australia demonstrates stronger maternal and early childhood health outcomes, including exceeding the national rate for early antenatal care access at 84% compared to 80% nationally in 2021. However, education outcomes lag, with South Australian children achieving on average 5% lower than national rates across NAPLAN Reading, Writing and Numeracy standards (Child Development Council, 2024).

Economic and labour market pressures, including lower workforce participation rates (64% in December 2023 compared with 67% nationally), strain service delivery capacity and sustainability, particularly in maintaining skilled workforces in rural and remote regions (South Australian Treasury, 2024). Taken together, the unique South Australian demographic and social landscape demands tailored systemic responses to best meet the needs of children and families.

## The Contemporary Policy and Legislative Context

### Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Act, 2025

South Australia's child and family services sector operates within a dynamic and evolving policy and legislative environment shaped by national reforms, community expectations and complex local realities. The passage of the *Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Bill 2024* and the *Children and Young People (Safety and Support) Act, 2025* marked a significant moment in this landscape, aimed at strengthening cultural responsiveness, elevating children's voices and embedding a public health approach to child protection.

Legislative reform was widely recognised as critically needed; it is important to acknowledge the depth of discussion and debate that accompanied this Bill through its development and parliamentary consideration. The importance of both rigorous evidence and genuine partnership and collaboration in shaping legislative and practice change was clear through this process. The passage of this Bill should be understood not simply as an endpoint, but as part of an ongoing, iterative reform journey.

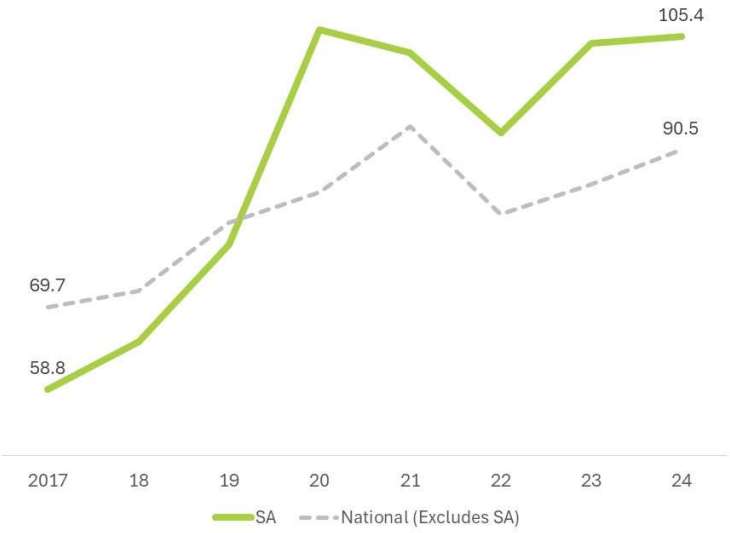
In this context, the commitment to continue listening, learning, partnerships and continuous learning remains essential. Ongoing partnership across government, non-government agencies and community stakeholders remains central to navigating complexity, monitoring the effects of recent changes and delivering improved outcomes for all South Australian children and families. The sector's strength lies in its capacity for honest reflection and collaborative problem solving, ensuring that reforms are grounded in lived experience and the evolving needs of South Australian children, young people and families.

# Current Practice Context

## South Australia's Child Protection and OOHC System

South Australia's child protection system continues to experience high demand, with notification rates remaining among the highest nationally. In 2024, more than 100 children per 1,000 were the subject of a notification, well above the national average of just over 90 per 1,000 (Figure 1), and more than triple that of some jurisdictions (AIHW, 2024).

**Figure 1: Child Protection Notifications per 1,000**




These notifications, which represent initial reports of children experiencing suspected harm or abuse, are the gateway to a statutory child protection response, with their increasing rate relative to national trends reflecting both significant community concern and heightened awareness of child safety issues across the state. Notifications have been widely recognised to be linked to surveillance of children and families, and thus do not necessarily directly reflect safety risk, but nevertheless necessitate practice responses.

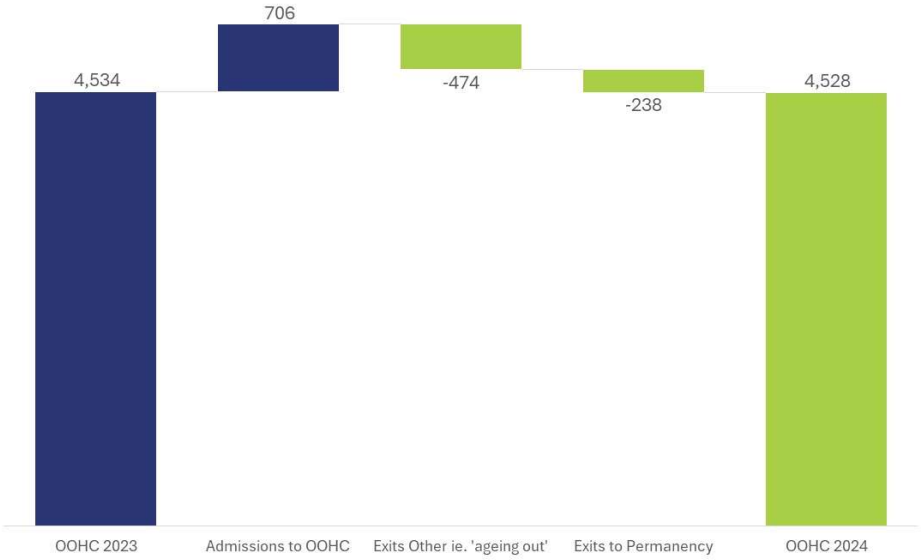
Since 2019, South Australia has consistently ranked as one of the jurisdictions with the highest rates of notifications per child population, placing ongoing pressures on front-line services and highlighting the need for sustained investment in prevention and earlier supports, alongside considering the alignment of sector practice and process to demand.

Once a notification is received, children and families undergo investigation to assess risk and determine appropriate responses to enable safety and wellbeing. Some of these children and families are provided services in their homes by a variety of family and intensive family support providers.

In 2024, South Australian caseworkers finalised investigations for 29% of total notifications, which aligns with national trends and suggests demand for child protection responses exceeds capacity to respond across Australia. Of the notifications that were investigated and finalised, 31% resulted in substantiated findings of child abuse or neglect. During the same period, approximately 20% of children who were recorded as having substantiated maltreatment were taken into out-of-home care (OOHC).

On face value, over recent years the number of children in OOHC in South Australia has been relatively stable. Figure 2 shows the net movement in the number of children being taken into OOHC and those exiting in South Australia between 2023 and 2024.

**Figure 2: Net Movement in The Number of Children in OOHC in South Australia (2023 to 2024)[1]**




Over the past year, 706 children were taken into OOHC, contributing to ongoing pressure for placements. In the same period, 474 children exited care, including children ageing out of care. During the same period exits to permanency, such as reunification or third-party guardianship orders, accounted for only 33% of all exits from OOHC. Opportunities to support children and young people to exit care are explored in more detail in the subsequent sections of this analysis.

### Over-Representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families

Over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within all elements of South Australia's child protection and OOHC services has continued to increase steadily. In 2017 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were 8.4 times more likely to be in OOHC in South Australia than non-Aboriginal children, with this rate increasing to 9.4 times in 2023. This highlights the need for urgent focused action including strengthened policy levers and reform focused on accelerating self-determination, reducing cultural bias in child protection practice and empowering Aboriginal children and families.

Recent authoritative reviews, including SNAICC's (2021) assessment and the landmark *Holding on to Our Future Inquiry* (Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, April Lawrie, 2024), have made clear that urgent, transformative change is needed in South Australia's child protection and OOHC systems. The Lawrie report found that at current rates, an estimated 140 of every 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in South Australia will be taken into OOHC by 2031. In response, Commissioner Lawrie set out 48 findings and 32

[1] 2023-24 data with exception of permanency exit data (2022-23) due to timing lags in reporting.

recommendations to meaningfully address the increasing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

South Australia continues to develop and refine its implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP), guided by ongoing partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and peak bodies (SNAICC, 2021; Attorney General's Department, South Australia, 2024). Commissioner Lawrie's report highlights areas of key opportunity, including incorporating a focus on culturally appropriate accountability mechanisms to monitor performance and applied recommendations which shift practice, policy and power to disrupt these cycles of systemic over-representation.

### Understanding Intersectionality

South Australia's *Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (2024 – 2025)* delivered 136 recommendations for system-wide reform, recognising the intersectionality of child protection with family violence, disability, mental health, alcohol and other drug use and housing. The Commission called for: earlier, coordinated and trauma-informed responses; scaling up integrated family support services; centring children as victim-survivors in their own right; strengthening prevention and lived experience governance, and; a sustained focus on those using violence, with targeted intervention for adolescents and better post-care support for care leavers.

These recommendations provide a clear mandate to build a more responsive, integrated child protection system in South Australia, addressing longstanding gaps and driving early intervention and recovery at both individual and system levels (Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence, 2025). The current report examines system responsiveness of child protection, noting that intersectionality with child protection and many other service systems including disability, mental health, housing, justice and other similar service landscapes is a significant area of focal need to more holistically empower children and families.

## Interpreting This Report

This report consolidates child protection and family support data to provide contextual information about South Australia's system responsiveness. The analysis presented in this report captures system-level patterns, noting that indicators are constrained by data availability and the inherent limitations of the national data sets. Individual data points or trends should not be extracted from their broader analytical context, as selective use of findings may misrepresent the overall system picture and underlying data limitations.

The report provides an overview to support interpretation on the responsiveness of the South Australia's child protection landscape on the basis of nationally available indicators and is not intended as a comprehensive assessment of system quality or safety and wellbeing outcomes for children and families. While the report incorporates limited consultations with sector stakeholders, the data primarily reflects administrative processes and system indicators rather than comprehensive lived experiences of children and families.

# Measuring System Responsiveness

## A Responsive Child and Family Sector

A responsive child and family service system is essential to the wellbeing of children, young people, and families in South Australia. It is reflected in how quickly children and families achieve safety and stability, the level and success of family support, children's experiences of enduring relationships and stability and the preservation of cultural connections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Indicators like OOHC entries, reunification rates and disparities in outcomes are proxy indicators of how well the system meets the needs of children and families navigating challenges, but at times can be challenging to interpret, given the breadth of available national data and indicators.

Assessing how the sector meets these goals requires a nuanced approach that acknowledges both areas of effective practice and that where continued effort is needed. This report aims to provide a holistic, balanced evidence-based overview of South Australia's child and family system responsiveness drawing on national data sets and key stakeholder consultations to highlight progress alongside opportunities for strengthening outcomes for children and families.

## South Australian Child and Family Services Responsiveness Index

Lumenia has developed a South Australian Child and Family Responsiveness Index (the Index) which provides a broad data-driven overview of how well the State's child and family support systems are responding to the needs of children, young people, and families. Drawing on 10 key indicators, the index aggregates these measures across four key domains: Family Support Preventing Children Being Taken Into Care, Child Protection, OOHC and Equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children.

The Index is a composite measure that brings together data from multiple sources into a single, measure. By doing so, it offers a clear and accessible way to track progress across the sector broadly. Its conceptualisation is similar to other well-accepted composite index measures, such as the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Program, 2025), which are tools used by policymakers and practitioners to monitor wellbeing and ensure service responsiveness.

By combining diverse indicators into one overarching measure, the Index delivers several key advantages for enabling:

- **Comparisons across jurisdictions:** The Index is constructed to facilitate comparative assessments between South Australia and other jurisdictions, helping identify promising practices and areas that require additional focus.
- **Direction for attention and resources:** The Index acts as a compass, guiding policymakers, service providers and decision-makers to focus their attention on areas of greatest need, or where responsiveness can create meaningful change.
- **A holistic system-wide perspective:** Unlike fragmented metrics that examine isolated elements of the service system and enable selective interpretation of indicators, the Index synthesises various indicators to reflect how preventing entries, child protection and OOHC systems respond to children and families' needs.

The Index brings together ten indicators (refer to Appendix B and below for further information) that examine critical aspects of each part of the system into four groups to measure responsiveness of systems in:

1. **Family Support Preventing Children Being Taken Into Care:** preventing children from entering or re-entering care, indicative of the availability and efficacy of family support and family preservation services.
2. **Child Protection:** ensuring timely child protection responses and high-quality decision making.
3. **Out-of-home Care**: providing family-based care, stability and returning children in care to their families.
4. **Equity:** Equity and over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

To aid comparison across the indicators, data is standardised and then scaled such that 2017 serves as the base year and is equal to 100. This allows year-on-year changes to be expressed as index scores relative to the baseline. Data points above the base year result indicate an improvement in overall responsiveness, while a score below the base year indicates a deterioration in overall responsiveness across the indicators.

In a sector as complex as child and family services, it is important to recognise that no single measure nor data source tells the whole story. As such, we analyse trends in system responsiveness with reference to additional data and interpret it alongside other forms of evidence which includes lived experience to draw insights that can drive continued improvement across the whole system.

A key innovation in the South Australian context is the BetterStart linked data process, an initiative which extends and refines the baseline complexity profiles used by the Department of Human Services (DHS) to assess clients. BetterStart enhances the state's capacity for evidence capture and evaluation, laying the groundwork for more robust measurement of what works, for whom and under what circumstances, enabling future resource allocation, continuous quality improvement, and the scaling of effective early services strategies (BetterStart Research Group, accessed August 2025).

The Index and analysis presented herein complements the work of BetterStart, providing national comparators to support interpreting the responsiveness of the child and family sector in South Australia relative to other jurisdictions, complementing BetterStart in identifying areas of future focus to ensure South Australia delivers stronger outcomes for children and families.

## Comparator Jurisdictions

National child protection and family services statistics provide a broad view of system-wide performance, but averages can be heavily weighted by larger states such as New South Wales and Victoria. When jurisdictional data is compared to national trends, this can mask regional trends relevant to South Australia. At the same time, results from smaller jurisdictions tend to be more volatile due to their smaller population sizes meaning that small changes in absolute numbers can produce large swings in rates and outcomes, making interpretation difficult and sometimes misleading.

To address these issues, this report draws on an amalgamated Comparator Group (refer to Appendix C). Jurisdictions were examined based on demographic, socio-economic and child

and family sector characteristics to identify jurisdictions 'most similar' to South Australia, with Queensland and Western Australia identified as closest matches across these criteria. By combining the indicator results for these two states, this tailored Comparator Group provides an alternative complementary reference point alongside national results supporting more meaningful comparative assessment of South Australia's system responsiveness by reducing the impacts of scale and indicator volatility.

It should be noted that where the comparator group is also experiencing similar performance challenges, this does not suggest that attention does not need to be focused on improvement in South Australia; rather, the inclusion of a comparator enables consideration on the consistent challenges facing other jurisdictions with similar demographic profiles to develop tailored responses to better meet child and family needs within and across these settings.

## Index Results

Results for the South Australian Child and Family Services Responsiveness Index are provided in Figure 3 and compared with the Comparator Group and national indices.

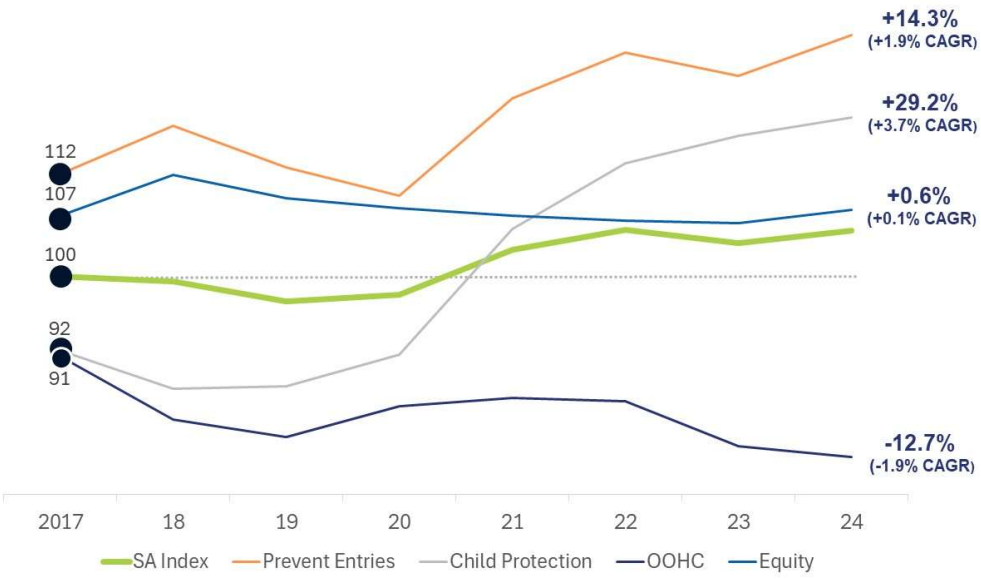
**Figure 3. South Australia Responsiveness Index**

Across the 10 underlying indicators, South Australian system responsiveness levels have shown steady, albeit modest, improvement rising 5.3% above its 2017 baseline by 2024, a compound annual growth rate (CAGR)[2] of 0.7%. The national average showed no net change over the period, while the Comparator Group declined by 2.9% (-0.4% CAGR). Notably, South Australia started from a significantly lower baseline than both comparisons, beginning 10 index points below the national average in 2017; thus, although its performance has improved over time, it still falls short of national average responsiveness. However, the consistent upward trajectory against a backdrop of declining or static performance elsewhere is noteworthy.

[2] Compound annual growth rate (CAGR) is the annualised rate of return that smooths out fluctuations to show steady growth equivalent over the measurement period. Calculated as (Ending Value ÷ Beginning Value)^(1/Years) - 1.

To demonstrate what is driving the South Australian index trend, Figure 4 shows a breakdown of the Index by its component groups of indicators.

**Figure 4: South Australia Index: Indicator Group Contributions**




The component breakdown shows that South Australia's modest but consistent improvement has been driven by improving performance across two key indicator groups.

The strongest contributor to system responsiveness improvement has been the Child Protection category which improved by 29.2% (+3.7% CAGR), driven primarily by the timely completion of investigations. Similarly, the Preventing Entries category, achieved a 14.3% improvement (+1.9% CAGR) driven by reductions in children being taken into OOHC and repeat notifications.

By contrast, the OOHC category showed a deterioration of 12.7% (-1.9% CAGR) from its 2017 baseline. This deterioration was driven by declines in family-based care use, placement stability and lengthening time children spend in OOHC. The Equity category remained relatively stable with 0.6% change (+0.1% CAGR), indicating that disparities in child protection outcomes, particularly for Aboriginal children, persist.

# Key Indicators of Responsiveness

## Preventing Entries to Out-of-Home Care

### Keeping Children Safely At Home

Between 2021 and 2024, South Australia reported an increase of over 3,000 children commencing Intensive Family Support (IFS) services in its data provided to the Productivity Commission (2025). On the basis of stakeholder consultation undertaken to inform interpretation of this data, it is widely acknowledged that a significant driver for this increase was due to changes in data capture which led to some family preservation and protective intervention programs not previously recorded as family support services being captured through this reporting.

These variations in data capture makes year-on-year and cross-jurisdictional comparisons of this indicator challenging for periods prior to 2021. Despite this, previous budget allocations of $35.7 million over 5 years to enhance IFS services (Department of Treasury and Finance, 2023) are likely to have contributed to genuine increases in families receiving this support over time.

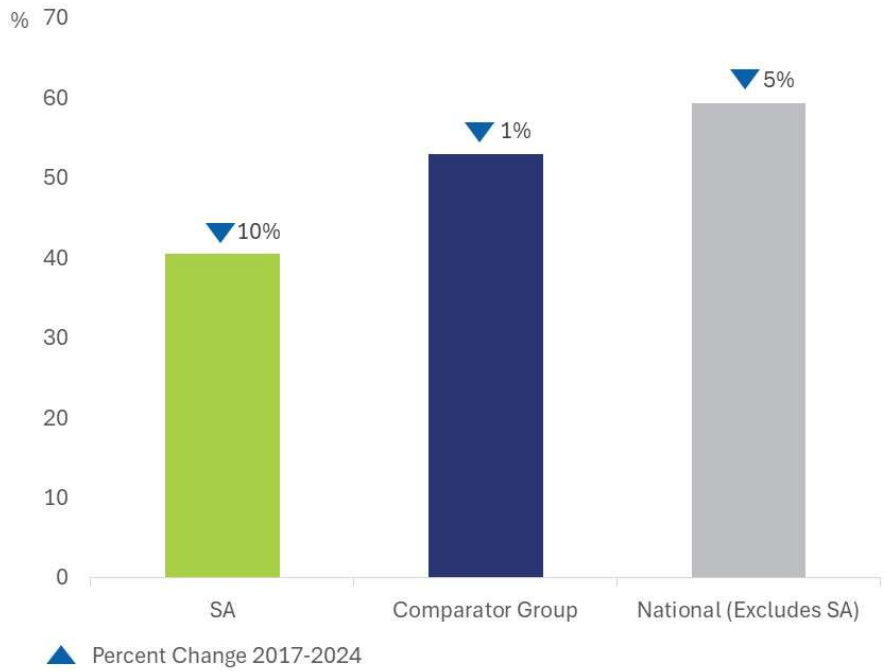
Given the limitations of South Australia's IFS data reported at a national level, this report draws on alternative indicators of effectiveness of supports to families to prevent child protection impacts.

> ***"We know that South Australian parents caught up in the child protection system want to be good parents, but many face barriers and lack support."*** *– Nadia Bergineti, CEO Reily Foundation (2023)*

The number of children and families being re-reported to child protection services reflects on both the responsiveness of the system and the effectiveness of family support strategies. It is indicative of whether previous child protection activities, including family supports, have achieved lasting safety and stability outcomes for children and their families.

Figure 5 presents the proportion of children who were the subject of notifications or investigations in 2024 who were the subject of previous notifications and illustrates how this measure has changed over time.

**Figure 5: Re-notification of Children in Child Protection (2024)**




Rates of re-notification for children and their families are high across all jurisdictions. 41% of children who were the subject of notifications or investigations in South Australia had previous involvement with child protection services in 2024, however this rate is lower than both the

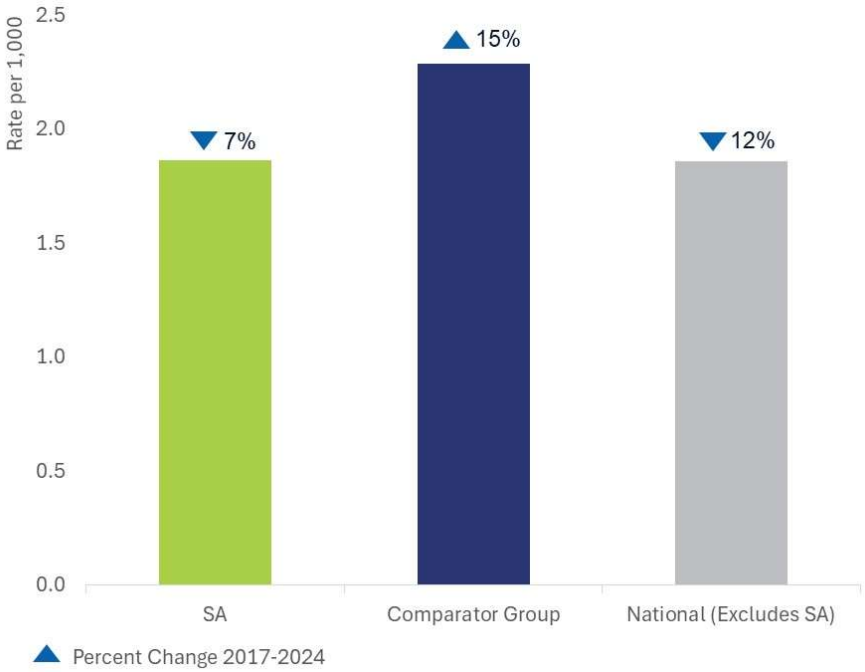
Comparator Group (53%) and the national average (59%). South Australia has experienced the most substantial decline in re-notifications of any jurisdiction, recording a 10% reduction since 2017. In contrast, the Comparator Group and national figures show only marginal decreases of 1% and 5%, respectively.

### Children Being Taken Into Out-of-Home Care

The number of children taken into OOHC also serves as an indicator of the effectiveness of family support initiatives and the overall responsiveness of the child protection system. Lower rates can be suggestive of more effective prevention strategies to support families to remain safely together. Conversely, higher rates may reflect unmet needs, risk-averse practice or gaps in earlier supports.

Figure 6 compares the rate of children being taken into OOHC in 2024 for South Australia, the Comparator Group and nationally and illustrates how this measure has changed over time.

**Figure 6: Children Being Taken Into OOHC (2024)**




In 2024, South Australia took 1.9 children per 1,000 head of the general child population into OOHC, a similar rate to the national average. This continues a declining trend for the state, reflecting a 7% decrease in children per 1,000 being taken into care since 2017, also consistent with the national trend with a decreased rate of 12%. In contrast, the Comparator Group took just over 2.3 children per 1,000 into care, a rate which has risen by 15% over the same period.

## Child Protection

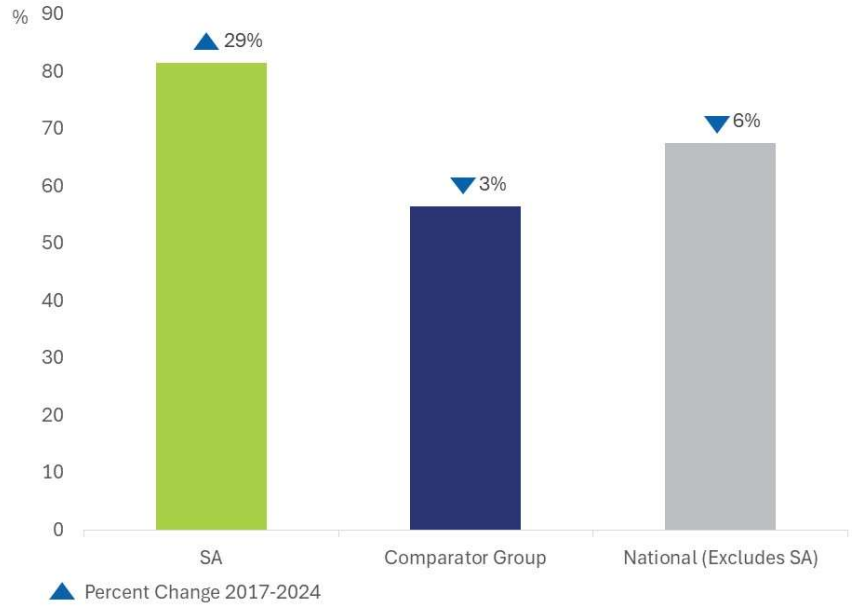
### Investigations Within 90 Days

Timely responses are a fundamental aspect of effective child protection practice, ensuring that families are navigating challenges are engaged with and, where necessary, families and

children are rapidly supported and empowered. One key measure of timeliness available in national datasets is the proportion of investigations completed within 90 days.

Figure 7 compares the percent of investigations completed within 90 days in 2024 for South Australia, the Comparator Group and nationally, illustrating how this measure has changed over time.

**Figure 7: Investigations Completed ≤ 90 Days (2024)**




South Australia completed over 80% of child protection investigations within 90 days in 2024, outperforming both the Comparator Group (56%) and the national rate (67%). Almost a third (29%) of investigations in South Australia were finalised in under 29 days, almost double the national average (16%).

Since 2017, South Australia has achieved a 29% improvement in timeliness, while both the Comparator Group and national timely completion rates have declined by 3% and 6% respectively. We note that timeliness alone does not necessarily reflect quality of responses; further exploration of this issue is provided below.

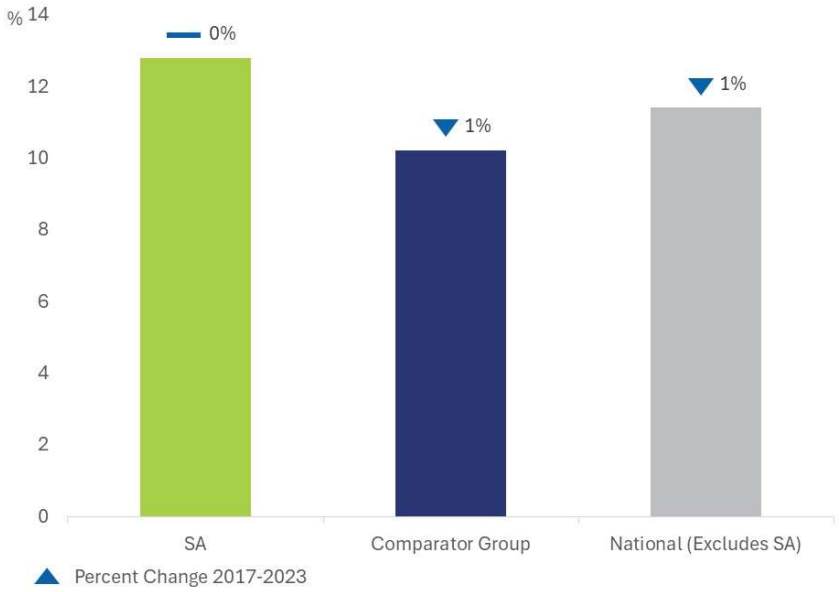
### Substantiations Following Previous non-Substantiation Finding

A substantiation of child abuse or neglect following a previous non-substantiation can provide important insights into the quality of frontline child protection decision-making and the supports provided to families navigating challenges. This indicator measures the proportion of children who are subsequently the subject of a substantiated notification within 12 months of a prior notification that was non-substantiated.

It is important to recognise that some cases will be appropriately non-substantiated initially due to the available evidence which suggested that family circumstances did not warrant statutory intervention or other supports at that time, with family circumstances changing over time. Nevertheless, a consistently high rate of subsequent substantiations may indicate missed concerns, insufficient family engagement, follow-up and support when the original case was closed and point to missed opportunities for empowering sustained child and family outcomes.

Figure 8 compares the percentage of children subject of a substantiation within 12 months of a non-substantiated investigation finding within South Australia and comparator jurisdictions.

**Figure 8: Children Substantiated ≤ 12 Months Following Non-substantiation Decision (2023)**




In 2024, almost 13% of all South Australian children who were subject of a non-substantiated investigation in the previous year were subject to a further substantiated investigation within 12 months, exceeding both the Comparator Group (10%) and the national rate (11%). The South Australian rate for substantiation following non-substantiation within 12 months has not improved since 2017, with a peak of 16% in 2020 and return to 13% in current data.

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***"We know that when policy and practice is informed by parents and family with lived experience, we see better outcomes for everyone involved."*** *– Simone Mather, as stated in her former role as Executive Director, Child, Youth and Family, Life Without Barriers, 2023.*

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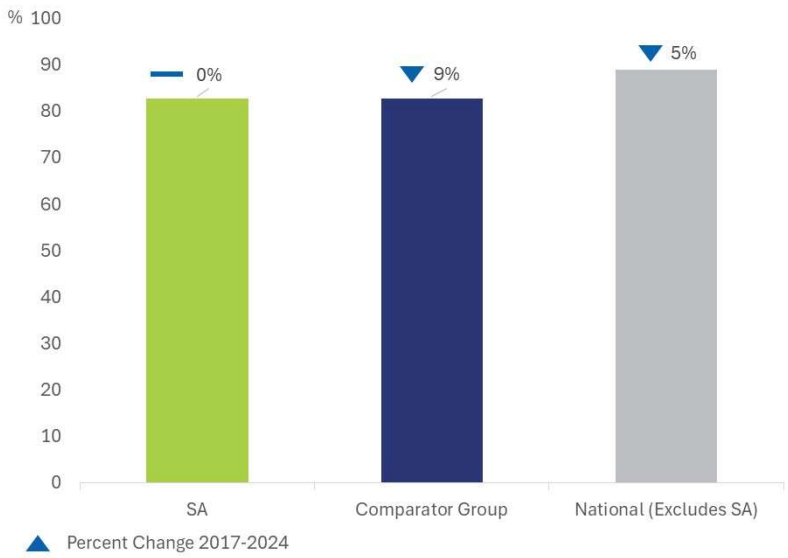
## Out-of-Home Experience

### Provision of Home-based Care

Providing children and young people who cannot safely remain with their families the opportunity to live in nurturing, family-like environments is a key aim of the care system. The two primary forms of family-based care reported at a national level relative or kinship care, where children live with family members or others who have a close, pre-existing relationship with them, and foster care, where children are cared for by approved carers. Both approaches have been shown to offer greater stability than non-family-based care, with kinship care recognised in international studies as enabling higher rates of relational continuity and supporting reunification and stability outcomes for children in care (Casey Family Programs, 2021).

Figure 9 compares the percentage of children placed in family-based care for South Australia, the Comparator Group and nationally.

**Figure 9: Children in Family-based Care (2024)**




In 2024, nearly 83% of children in OOHC in South Australia were placed in family-based care, either with foster carers or relative and kinship carers, which is similar to the Comparator Group (83%) but significantly lower than the national average (89%).

Over the 2017 – 2024 period, relative and kinship care placements in South Australia have risen slightly (14%), with foster care placements declining (21%). This is coupled with a marked rise in residential care across the state, with 57% increase in its use since 2017. In 2024, 17% of all children and young people in OOHC were placed in residential care in South Australia, the second highest proportion nationwide.

> ***"Current efforts to locate Aboriginal family when placing Aboriginal children are often inadequate and do not occur in a timely manner, resulting in the placement of Aboriginal children with non-Aboriginal carers. The misplaced use of Eurocentric attachment theory results in Aboriginal children remaining in non-Aboriginal foster placements, even when Aboriginal family are subsequently identified".*** *Finding 30, Holding Onto Our Future, 2024.*

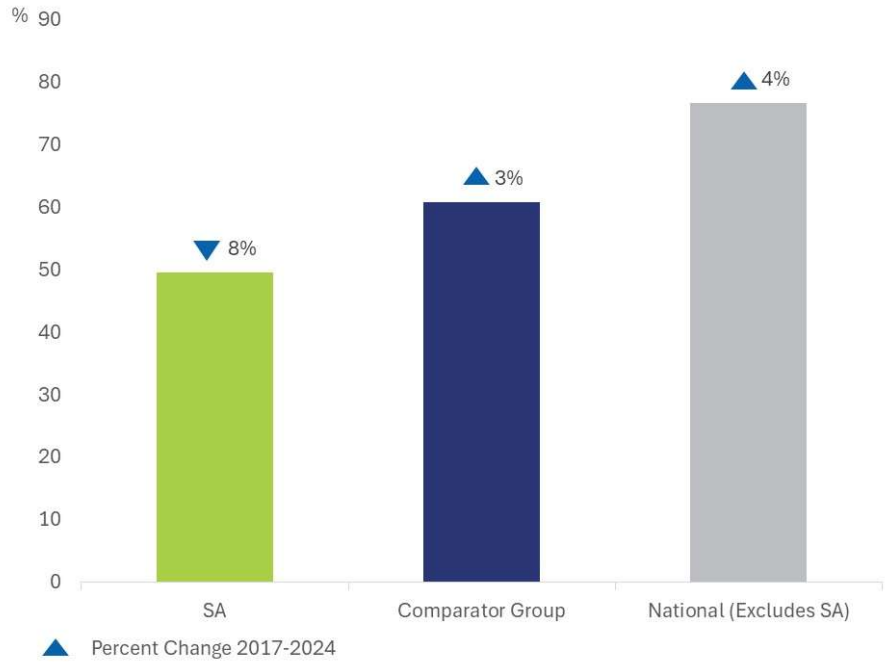
## Placement Stability

Placement stability is a widely considered a fundamental aspect of quality care for children and young people in OOHC. It refers to the ability of the care system to ensure that children experience as few moves as possible while in care, supporting relational continuity. Stable placements, particularly when with kin, provide children with a sense of security, continuity and belonging, which are crucial for healthy emotional, social, and cognitive development.

Conversely, frequent placement changes can disrupt relationships, undermine a child's sense of safety, and adversely affect long-term wellbeing and outcomes. As such, placement stability is widely recognised as a key indicator of the effectiveness and responsiveness of OOHC systems (Asif, Breen and Wells, 2024).

Figure 10 compares the percentage of children in OOHC in South Australia who have experienced 1 or 2 placements with the Comparator Group and nationally.

**Figure 10: Stability in Care, Children with 1-2 Placements (2024)**




South Australian children in OOHC experience placement stability rate of just under 50%, significantly lower than both the Comparator Group (61%) and the national average (77%). Notably, South Australia has experienced a decline in placement stability since 2017 of 8%. In contrast, the Comparator Group and the national average reported increases of 3% and 4% respectively over the same time frame. The analysis notes that the stability rate for South Australia improves markedly for children in care beyond two years, however, this indicator highlights a growing challenge in SA's ability to provide consistent, stable placements for children and young people in their first two years of being taken into OOHC.

### Length of Time in Care

Children being taken into OOHC remaining in care for less than two years is an indicator that reflects the effectiveness of the child protection system in achieving timely, long-term solutions for children and families that reduce future child protection impacts and maximise safety and wellbeing. This measure tracks the proportion of children who are able to leave care, whether through reunification with family or via permanent alternative arrangements, within two years of entry.

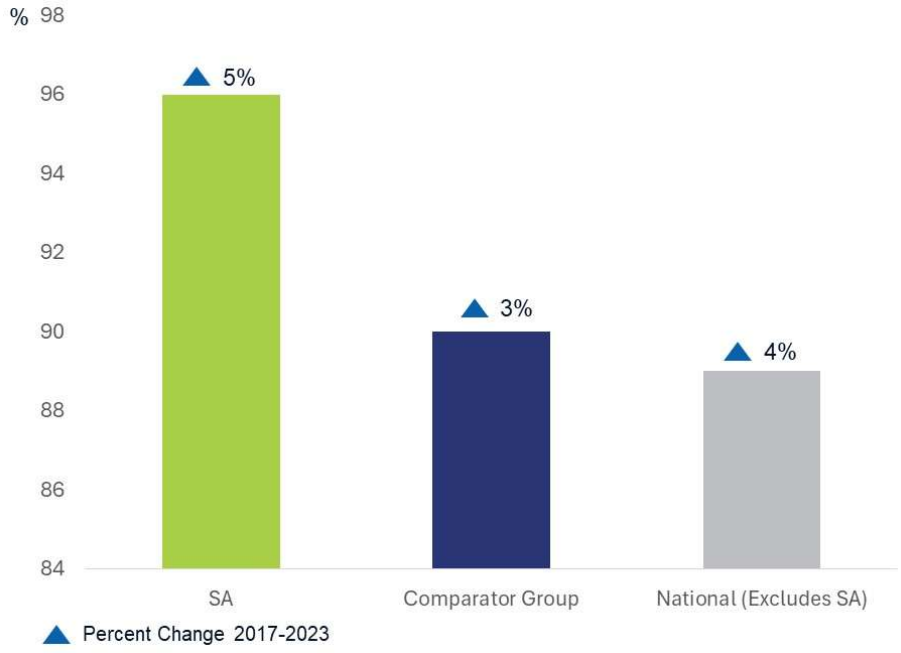
South Australia trails both the Comparator Group (359 children per 1,000 head of OOHC population) and the national result (313 children) with 241 children in care for over 24 months. This trend has diverged from the Comparator Group and national results more markedly since

2021. This pattern indicates that more South Australian children who are taken into care are remaining in care beyond two years, pointing to challenges in supporting children and families to enable children to exit care in a timely manner.

### Exiting to Permanency

Ensuring that children and young people are both able to exit care and do not subsequently re-enter care is an important component of responsiveness. Permanency in this context includes reunification of children with their birth family and third-party guardianship orders. Figure 11 shows the percentage of exits from OOHC to permanency in 2023 that were sustained after 12 months.

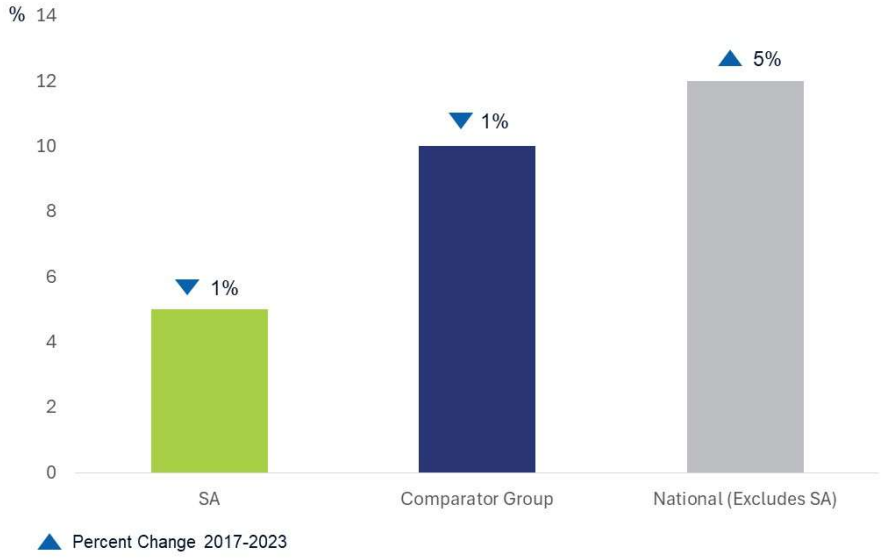
**Figure 11: Sustained Permanency Exits After 12 Months of All Permanency Exits (2023)**




On this measure South Australia is a national leader with 96% of all exits to permanency in 2023 sustained after 12 months compared with 90% and 89% for the Comparator Group and nationally respectively.

Figure 12 shows sustained permanency exits as a percentage of the OOHC population.

**Figure 12: Sustained Permanency Exits After 12 Months of OOHC Population (2023)**



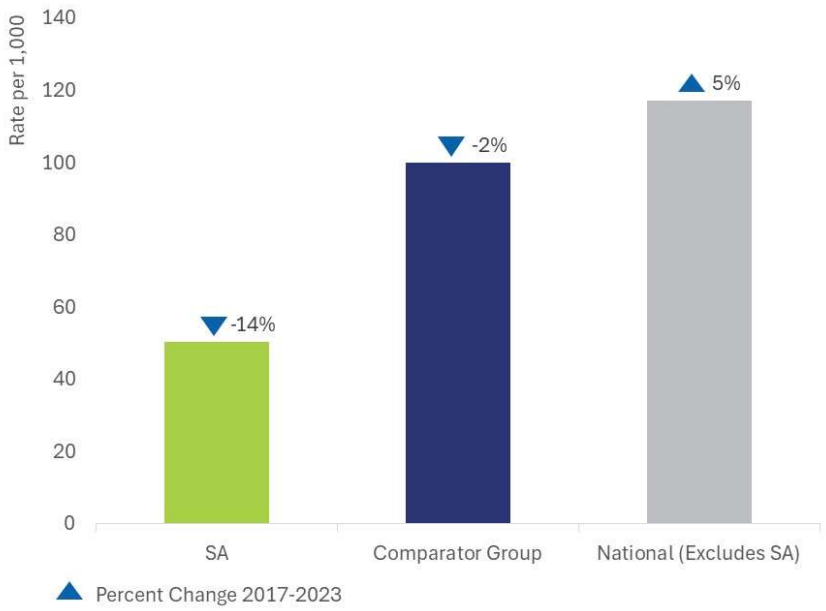

South Australin exits to sustained permanency represented just 5% of the OOHC population in 2023, amongst the lowest nationally. The Comparator Group achieves double South Australia's rate at 10% of the OOHC population while the national rate of sustained permanency in 2023 was 12% of the OOHC population. The South Australian result also reflects the lowest the lowest rate of reunification of Aboriginal children in Australia (Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, 2024.

Figure 13 shows the rate of sustained permanency exits per 1,000 head of the OOHC population. The modest scale of children and young people being exited to permanency in South Australia results in one of the lowest rates per care population nationally.

Despite South Australian permanency exits increasing by 15% since 2017, the OOHC population has expanded at more than double this rate (33%) thus this results in an overall declining trend.

Consequently, currently South Australian children and young people exit to permanency at rates per population that fall well below both the Comparator Group and national averages.

**Figure 13: Sustained Permanency Exits After 12 Months Rate per 1,000 (2023)**




Taken together, this suggests that where South Australian children and young people exit to permanency, they are unlikely to be taken back into care, however there are lower rates of South Australian children exiting to permanency overall and thus the ratio of children experiencing stable exits relative to the population of children in care are relatively low and an area of focal need.

## Achieving Equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

### Over-representation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be over-represented at all stages of involvement in child protection systems. Over-representation highlights bias in practice and results in disparity in outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and non-Aboriginal children; for example, a ratio of 10 indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 10 times more likely to be in OOHC than non-Aboriginal children when adjusting for the population sizes of each group (SNAICC, 2024).

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***Without change, it is predicted that by 2031 as many as 140 in every 1000 Aboriginal children will be in out-of-home care.*** *(Commissioner Lawrie, Holding Onto Our Future, 2024)*

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Figure 14 presents the rates of over-representation for South Australia, the Comparator Group and nationally.

**Figure 14: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Overrepresentation Rate in OOHC**

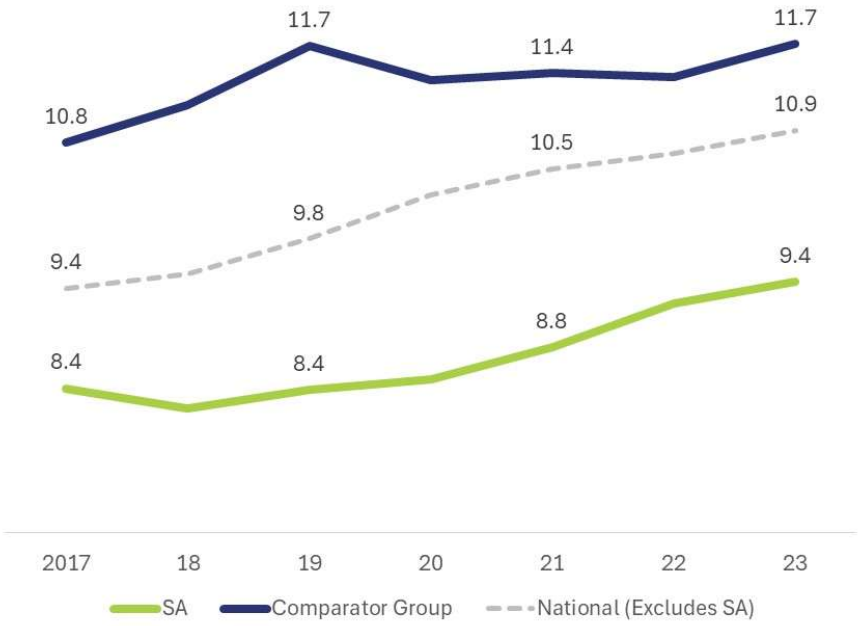


Figure 14 presents ongoing high over-representation and deteriorating trends, such that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are present in OOHC at rates higher than non-Aboriginal children across all observed periods. Western Australia experiences rates amongst the highest nationally and heavily influencing the Comparator Group results that were significantly higher in 2023 (11.7) than both the South Australian (9.4) and national (10.9) results.

The SNAICC Family Matters Report (2024) contains a detailed analysis of over representation by jurisdiction drawing on AIHW data, highlighting that over-representation occurs at the point of notification and is amplified at every key stage of the child protection and OOHC process.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in OOHC with Relatives and Kin

Placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC with relatives and kin is an indicator of cultural security and best practice within the child protection system. This measure reflects the system's capacity to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to maintain familial, community, and cultural connections during their time in OOHC. National child protection policy and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle identify placement with family, kin, or community as the preferred approach for Aboriginal children, aiming to uphold children's rights and support their wellbeing within their cultural context (SNAICC, 2025).

Just over half (56%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC in 2024 were placed with relatives or kin, closely aligning with the national rate of 54%. There remains

significant opportunity for South Australia to further improve outcomes and increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children taken into OOHC connected to kin, community and culture through kinship care.

# Towards a More Responsive System

## Introduction

This section provides an integrated analysis of what this national data tells us about how effectively South Australia's family child protection and OOHC systems are responding to the needs of children, families, and communities. The discussion highlights both areas where the system demonstrates agility and effectiveness, and those where improvements are needed to strengthen timely, appropriate responses.

> ***Our child protection system was not designed to respond to the scale of demand that it's currently facing, as one in three South Australian children are now reported before they turn 18***. *– Professor Leah Bromfeld (South Australian Government, 2023)*

## Family Support

The recent South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence highlighted the significant service gap for child and family support services (CFSS), noting that only 36% of referrals are currently met due to capacity constraints (Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence, 2025, p. 305). This speaks to the urgent need to expand family support programs and strengthen policies designed to improve access, early intervention and integration across the child protection and adjacent service systems.

Aligned to these pressing needs, significant investments have been made in the family support area in recent years, most notably through the 2023–24 State Budget, which committed $55.2 million in initiatives for family support and intensive family support services over a five-year period, complemented by an additional $4 million directed to targeted service areas including the Strong Families, Strong Communities initiative (Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People, 2025).

These budget initiatives reflect a growing recognition that effective, evidence-based family support can reduce escalation into crisis, prevent entry to OOHC and form the backbone of a more responsive, preventative system. This includes new analysis led by Adelaide University's BetterStart Group and the DHS (Bromfield, 2025) which demonstrates that South Australia's CFSS reduces OOHC entry and delivers strong returns for government. Data shows 93% of families supported through CFSS avoid child removal, achieving substantial cost savings and better outcomes for children and families. This evidence further emphasises the need to prioritise investment in early intervention in reform efforts to reduce demand for crisis services and meaningfully empower children and families.

According to the Australian Centre for Child Protection (2024) and the Premier of South Australia (2025) an expanded Family Group Conferencing (FGC) program has supported 1,187

children to safely maintain connection with their families. In 2023–24, the success rate in keeping children with their families is reported at 91.5%, and 90.4% for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These outcomes show that children who participate in FGC are significantly less likely to enter OOHC or experience future abuse or neglect.

The major shift in classification and reporting of family support and intensive family support in 2021 poses challenges for monitoring progress and comparing results over time as previously discussed. The Guardian for Children and Young People (2025) notes the criticality of being able to accurately report on South Australia investment in family support services, and it is anticipated that the concentrated focus on early intervention enabled by the work of the Department of Human Services will enable more granular visibility on both current early supports and their short- and long- term outcomes.

While South Australia is making major new investments and leveraging data-driven innovations in family support services to deliver more targeted, responsive support, the scale of unmet need remains substantial. In 2023-24, of the nearly 4,000 Intensive Family Service referrals, 54% were unable to be provided a service (Government of South Australia, 2025), which underscores why these new investments and service innovations are critical priorities for addressing demand pressures. At the same time, changes in classification and the underlying complexities of data reporting mean that rigorous analysis and transparency will be vital to ensure that the impact of these reforms can be accurately tracked, evaluated, and compared both locally and nationally.

## Workforce Capacity and Decision Making

The capacity and stability of the child protection workforce in South Australia has a profound impact on service quality, the effectiveness of investigation processes, and outcomes for children and families. The data tells us that South Australia completed a high volume of investigations in a timely manner, over 80% within 90 days in 2024, outpacing both the Comparator Group and national rates. However, an important dimension of workforce impact is the quality of decision-making during these investigations. Despite timely case closures, South Australia continues to report a relatively high rate of children who are substantiated within 12 months of an earlier non-substantiation, remaining above comparator and national averages. This pattern warrants attention to ensure that thorough risk assessment and adequate follow-up for families remains a priority alongside timeliness imperatives.

The introduction of a new, stand-alone Child Protection Award, including a 4% wage increase and improvements to superannuation, is designed to make South Australia a more attractive environment for recruiting and retaining qualified frontline practitioners, supporting quality child protection practice that meets the needs of families. Lower workforce attrition and vacancies may enable more thorough assessments and engagement with families, improving both the timeliness and quality of child protection responses.

Despite these steps, it is notable that overall expenditure on child protection services has generally declined over the past four years (ROGS, 2025). Maintaining or expanding investment to enable responsive engagement with families is essential. Addressing workforce shortages will require sustained resource allocation to both attract and retain skilled staff and ensure that workloads remain balanced to ensure quality engagement with families that is trauma informed, strengths focused and supports children and young people to achieve safety and enduring relational connection.

## Permanency

A key feature of South Australia's approach to reunification is the dedicated Reunification Court within the Youth Court. This specialist judicial process is designed for cases in which DCP is actively considering or pursuing reunification with parents. The Reunification Court operates as a closed, problem-solving forum, where expectations are clearly communicated, progress is closely monitored through regular review hearings, and collaborative planning is facilitated among families, service providers, and the court.

The central challenge is to shift the balance between what the Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (2025) refers to as the *'try'* versus *'success'* rate. South Australia demonstrates a high success rate for enduring reunification where it occurs, but a comparatively low proportion of children and families are enabled to achieve reunification relative to other jurisdictions. There may be opportunities to leverage reunification infrastructure such as the Reunification Court and dedicated NGO reunification services unburdened by statutory case management responsibilities to scale reunification efforts.

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***"Local community partnerships are important and needed to empower families".*** *– Participant, Kadina Aboriginal Community forum (Holding Onto Our Future, 2024)*

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## Parents and Infants

South Australia has persistently recorded higher rates of infants (children aged <1 year) being taken into OOHC compared to the national average. In 2021, the state reached a peak of 13 infants taken into care per 1,000 infants, substantially above the national rate of 7.6 per 1,000 for that year. While these rates have since declined, South Australia continues to exceed the national figure, with 7.7 infants taken into care per 1,000 in 2024, compared to 6.5 per 1,000 nationally (AIHW Table S5.1,2024). When it comes to permanency outcomes, South Australia's reunification rates for infants remain below the national average. In 2024, only 15.6% of infant OOHC exits in South Australia were reunifications with birth parents, compared to 22.5% nationally (AIHW, 2024 Pathways from Care report). Taken together, this highlights that high rates of infants are being taken into care, with fewer reunified than other jurisdictions.

Stakeholder feedback highlighted ongoing opportunities for the provision of supports to families, particularly in coordination between the DCP and DHS regarding families with unborn children to ensure they receive supports they require prior to the birth of their child. Although DHS is only able to provide services to less than half of families referred due to capacity limitations, there is a growing recognition of the need to prioritise young parents. DHS explicitly identifies young parents as a priority population group as part of their Child and Wellbeing Program Service Model (2024).

Given the significant opportunity to disrupt cycles of intergenerational trauma through providing supports early to expectant parents, ensuring coordinated, and strengths-centred supports which build on their abilities is essential. Balancing perceived risks through comprehensive services can both support reducing infants being taken into care and accelerate their return to their families.

## Family-based Care

South Australia is increasingly challenged in its ability to offer family-based care in the form of foster or relative/kinship care. Alongside this trend has been a marked increase in the proportion of children placed in residential care (17% in 2024). Since 2017, the growth in residential care placements has outstripped that of both foster and kinship care, with South Australia experiencing an 57% increase in residential care compared to a 21% decline in foster care placements and more modest 14% increase in kinship care.

Several demographic and economic factors contribute to this dynamic. Carer recruitment and retention have become increasingly challenging due to an aging carer population, more working families with limited capacity to provide care, and higher costs of living placing additional pressure on households. Anecdotally, some carers report feeling unsupported or unable to sustain long-term placements, further contributing to a decline in available family-based care options.

Kinship care offers unique advantages in supporting cultural connection and family continuity. Analysis by Lumenia (2025) suggests that increased use of relative kinship care is associated with lower residential care growth rates, echoing international evidence in other settings. By increasing access to training, financial support and tailored services for kin carers, more children are able to remain within their extended family networks, reducing reliance on institutional care settings and ensuring children maintain relational continuity and grow strong and connected in community and culture.

The continuing rise in residential placements underscores the importance of reinvigorating kinship care as a system priority. Addressing economic barriers while strengthening resources and supports for both foster and kinship carers, will be essential to ensuring that more South Australian children have the opportunity to grow within family-based settings.

## Placement Stability

The achievement of stability in OOHC is stronger in South Australia than many other jurisdictions, with 88.5% of children who had been in care for two years or more residing in one or two placements (ROGS, 2025), outperforming national benchmarks and comparator jurisdictions. This result demonstrates encouraging progress towards minimising placement disruption for children in for extended care periods.

This report adopts a higher threshold for analysing placement stability, focusing on the proportion of all children in care with one or two placements in a given year. This broader indicator provides a more comprehensive view of the overall care experience, capturing short- and medium-term stability as well as long-term outcomes. By including all children we draw attention to early disruption risks.

Policy and practice should focus on preventing early placement breakdowns, which often have lasting negative effects and increase the likelihood of multiple moves over time. Actions to strengthen placement stability must include greater investment in family-based care supports: providing foster and kinship carers with comprehensive training, practical assistance, respite options, and therapeutic resources tailored to the needs of children with trauma histories.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Over-representation

The persistent and disproportionate impact of child protection and OOHC on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is clearly documented in the previous Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People's landmark *Holding on to Our Future Inquiry* (2024).

This comprehensive report details the extent of over-representation, systemic challenges, and the multifaceted negative consequences experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families across every measure.

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***"It was very clear to me after my first engagement with Aboriginal children and young people, and their families and communities that child removals were a significant issue that touched the lives of many within the Aboriginal community and that the sense of harm to children, and their loss and grief could not be ignored.."*** *– Commissioner Lawrie, Holding Onto Our Future, 2024.*

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There is a movement towards meaningfully shifting power across child protection systems within Australia, enabling leadership including through delegated authority for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and investing in culturally responsive services that recognise family strengths and lived realities. This reform includes the systematic transfer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care to Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs), which is occurring, albeit not at the pace required, across multiple jurisdictions. The practice recognises that Aboriginal people and organisations are best placed to make decisions and deliver services that protect the best interests of Aboriginal children, with transfers prioritising children based on placement type and cultural connection needs.

This reform is focused on all elements of child protection conceptualisation and practice, recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership across the sector both in policy and service delivery creates strong outcomes for children and families. Within the South Australian context, there are opportunities to shift practice in line with that of other jurisdictions; expanding investment in Aboriginal family-led decision making, enabling delegation of authority, reducing the use of Structure Decision Making tools (SDM), and embracing shared decision-making approaches in reform planning are examples to this end.

Continuing shifts toward proportional investment in ACCOs across all elements of the child and family sector, reflecting the recognition that such organisations are best placed to provide culturally safe, early support and prevention services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (South Australian Government, 2025) are important focus areas which can disrupt systemic over-representation when coupled with a focus on practice changes to this end.

# Driving Responsiveness for South Australian Children and Families: What's next?

The current analysis of national data highlights a number of key focal areas for advancing child protection and family support in South Australia:

- **Strengthening access to early, intensive family supports** represents and ongoing area of need, enabling families to receive supports before crisis with a focus on maintaining children's connection to culture, kin, and community. Service design and future reform should focus on responding to the real-world intersectional challenges families navigate, including disability, mental health, housing instability and financial pressures, to prevent future child protection need.
- This report suggests focus on areas such as **reunification and infant removals** are required to bring South Australia's practice in line with national benchmarks, and enable families to remain safely together. Building on the foundations of established practice to enable scaling of this work presents an opportunity to accelerate South Australia's practice in these areas.
- Innovating family-based care with a focus on **empowering, resourcing and supporting kinship and foster carers** to enable safe, stable care and ensure enduring strong family and cultural bonds is necessary to reduce increasing use of residential care. This requires valuing the knowledge and needs of carers, minimising bureaucratic barriers and delivering flexible, practical support.
- For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in particular, **strengthening and sustaining kin and cultural connection** is paramount and aligned to the recommendations of recent reviews. Partnerships and investment should continue to shift to ACCOs, with ongoing practice and policy reform to de-colonise child protection systems and processes and reduce over-representation across all levels of child protection and OOHC.
- Future reforms should also **amplify the voices of people with lived experience**, invest in the workforce and establish transparent measures of progress. True change is able to be delivered through accountable, ongoing partnership with children, families, kin, carers and communities.

Aligned to these findings, CAFFSA's 2026 Election Asks (2025) include:

- Expand Intensive Family Services to reduce unmet demand;
- Expand Community-led, place-based supports for lower-intensity needs;
- Improving rates of reunification when a child is removed through sufficient resourcing and dedicated reunification workers
- Expand Specialist DFV-informed and culturally safe services, including community-led models;
- Develop visible, welcoming and accessible entry points into support, to reduce stigma and encourage early help-seeking;
- Sustained investment in workforce capability, including peer and lived experience roles, and regional infrastructure: and
- Measurement of outcomes and return on investment to demonstrate impact.

# Summary

This report's analysis of the South Australian context examines system responsiveness and draws attention to critical areas of focus and opportunity in the family support, child protection and OOHC system to empower families, children and young people to thrive. It highlights where performance is strong, where resources are making a difference and where reform is most urgently needed on the basis of national data and sector consultation.

It is important that the views of families, children and young people meaningfully shape both analysis and reform activities within the sector to ensure that their needs and aspirations are met through the sector's activities. The current report explores learnings from a national data lens, highlighting the need to continue to amplify the voices of those with lived experience in shaping practice and policy to strengthen outcomes for South Australian children and families.

This system responsiveness analysis points to South Australia's strengths in innovation and front-line response, while making clear the ongoing need for expansion of early family supports particularly for families with unborn children and infants, strengthening of family-based care, scaling reunification efforts and further partnership to address systemic inequities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children and families. These are the areas where continued effort, focused monitoring and targeted action will deliver a more responsive, equitable system for South Australian children and families.

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# Appendix A

## Demographic and socio-economic indicators

South Australia's demographic and socio-economic profile profoundly shapes the landscape for family and child services, influencing the strategies, priorities, and resources needed for effective support across family support, child protection, and OOHC. The latest Child and Development Council report (2024) provides revealing data on the unique circumstances faced by South Australian families, data that brings national differences and service challenges into sharper focus.

A particularly acute issue is the depth of disadvantage: over a quarter (26%) of children and young people aged under 20 live in the most socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances, well above the national average of 19.4%. This concentrated disadvantage means families face heightened barriers in daily life and signals a pressing need for targeted supports, prevention services, and policy responses grounded in local realities.

The report draws attention to persistently high rates of children and young people in OOHC which are amongst the highest of any jurisdiction nationally at 1.2% of the child population aged 0-17 compared with national data at 0.8%.

South Australia also has higher rates of disability among children under 18 (17% compared with 13% nationally). This places additional demands on service systems to be inclusive and adaptable, ensuring children with disability and their families can access supports tailored to complex and diverse needs.

The demographic profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities further highlights distinct challenges and opportunities. In South Australia, almost 40% of First Nations people are under 18, underscoring the need for child and family services that are not only culturally safe, but also co-designed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, leaders, and peak organisations.

A metropolitan lens shows that over 78% of South Australian children reside in the Adelaide metropolitan area, a figure higher than the national average for urban residents. However, this metropolitan concentration also risks masking the deeper disadvantages and service gaps experienced by families in regional and remote areas, where access to specialised support is often more limited.

Housing stress affects many, with rates of child homelessness in South Australia (57.0 per 10,000 children) exceeding the national figure (49.9 per 10,000). These numbers vividly indicate a critical intersection between child wellbeing and secure housing, confirming the urgent need for integrated solutions across sectors.

South Australia is demonstrating stronger results across key maternal and child health indicators, consistently outperforming national averages in several critical areas. SA exceeds the national rate for early antenatal care access, with 84% of expectant mothers attending their first visit within 14 weeks of pregnancy compared to 80% nationally in 2021.

The state has also made significant progress in reducing smoking during pregnancy, dropping from 11% in 2017 to 7% in 2021, well below the national rate of 8%. Additionally, SA achieves higher childhood immunisation coverage across all age groups, with 95.5% of five-year-olds fully immunised versus 94.3% nationally.

Education engagement and achievement, meanwhile, is slightly lower for South Australian children and young people than they are nationally. The proportion of South Australian children in years 3, 5 and 7 who achieve at or above the national NAPLAN minimum standard is on average 5% lower than the equivalent proportion nationally across Reading, Writing and Numeracy.

Cultural diversity continues to increase, with over 23% of South Australians born overseas. This growth in multicultural communities places further importance on services being both culturally competent and multilingual, responding to varied customs and new and emerging community needs. Outreach and engagement strategies must be sensitive and inclusive to ensure access and impact for CALD populations.

Finally, ongoing economic and labour market challenges, including a shrinking working-age population place pressure on the capacity and sustainability of service delivery. The challenge of maintaining a skilled, stable workforce is particularly acute in rural and remote regions and shapes both policy design and practical implementation.

Labour force participation rates in South Australia were 64% in December 2023 compared with the national rate of 67% (South Australian Treasury, 2024). The state has a higher proportion of people aged 65 and over within its population aged 15 years and above, which helps explain why South Australia's labour force participation rates remain well below national averages.

# Appendix B

## South Australian Child and Family Responsiveness Index

### Overview

Despite the availability of robust national datasets, there is no straightforward way to measure the overall responsiveness in terms of preventing entries to out-of-home care (OOHC), child protection and OOHC systems. The South Australian Child and Family Services Responsiveness Index (the Index) developed by Lumenia built on consultations with a range of key stakeholders and combines multiple data points into a single analytical framework.

The Index is designed to bring together multiple data points into a single analytical framework. Its aim is to provide a clearer and more holistic picture of the complex systems involved in family support, child protection, and out-of-home care (OOHC) in South Australia. By combining these datasets, the Index enables:

- **Comparisons across jurisdictions:** The Index is constructed to facilitate comparative assessments between South Australia and other jurisdictions, helping identify promising practices and areas that require additional focus.
- **Direction for attention and resources:** The Index acts as a compass, guiding policymakers, service providers, and decision-makers to focus their attention on areas of greatest need, or where responsiveness can create meaningful change.
- **A holistic system-wide perspective:** Unlike fragmented metrics that look at isolated pockets of the service system, the Index synthesises various indicators to reflect how family support, child protection, and OOHC systems interact and respond to children's and families' needs.

In constructing the Index the overarching goal is to measure the responsiveness of systems in meeting families and children's requirements. This is particularly important in areas where national datasets exist but do not capture the nuances of local system performance.

### Method

The index is a composite measure that brings together data from multiple sources into a single, score. By doing so, it offers a clear and accessible way to track progress. In the child and family sector, indexes such as the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Program, 2025) are tools used by policymakers and practitioners to monitor wellbeing, risk, and service responsiveness.

The Index brings together ten carefully selected indicators that examine critical aspects of each part of the system into four groups to measure responsiveness of systems in:

- preventing children from entering care, focusing on early supports and family preservation.
- ensuring timely child protection responses and high-quality decision making.
- providing family-based care, stability and returning children in care to their families.
- how well the system is addressing equity considerations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

To make these indicators comparable, data is normalised and then scaled so that 2017 serves as the base year with a value of 100. This allows year-on-year changes to be expressed as index scores relative to the baseline:

- A score above the baseline 2017 result indicates improvement or greater responsiveness compared to the 2017 baseline.
- A score below the baseline 2017 result indicates a deterioration in responsiveness compared to the baseline.

Because an upward trend should consistently represent an improvement in responsiveness, indicators where a reduction is generally regarded as a positive outcome (for example, fewer children entering care, reduced over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children) are inverted before inclusion in the index. This inversion ensures that across all measures, higher index values consistently represent more responsive and effective systems, and lower values consistently represent deterioration.

The index also uses a weighting system that places greater emphasis on preventing entries into care, enabling reunification, and reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the system. This means improvements in these priority areas will have a modest, but proportionally larger influence on the overall score.

Finally, by combining these normalised and weighted indicators into one framework, the Index can reveal trade-offs in system performance, such as when gains in one area are offset by setbacks in another, providing decision-makers with a more balanced and strategic view of overall responsiveness.

### Index Responsiveness Indicators

The table below summarises the key indicators from national datasets included in the Index.

| Group # | Group Name | Indicator | Inversion | Source Table(s) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| G1A | Preventing Entries to Care | Returning Children with Previous Child Protection Involvement | Y | AIHW Table S2.2 |
| G1B | | Admissions to OOHC | Y | ROGS Table 16A.4 |
| G2A | Child Protection | Timeliness of Investigations | N | ROGS Table 16A.10 |
| G2B | | Substantiation after previous non-substantiation | Y | ROGS Table 16A.11 |
| G3A | Out-of-Home Care | Children in Family-based Placements | N | ROGS Table 16A.20 |
| G3B | | Stability in Care 1-2 placements | N | ROGS Table 16A.16 |
| G3C | | Children in Care Less Than Two Years | N | ROGS Table 16A.17 |
| G3D | | Exiting to Sustained Permanency | N | ROGS Table 16A.41 |
| G4A | Equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children | Over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in OOHC | Y | AIHW Table T3 and SNAICC (2024) |
| G4B | | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children Placed with Relatives / Kin | N | ROGS Table 16A.22 |

### Interpretation Considerations

While the Index enables valuable system-wide insights, some limitations arise from the inherent limitations in AIHW and ROGS datasets. Variations in data definitions, collection methods, and reporting practices across jurisdictions can affect comparability, meaning that differences in scores may partly reflect these inconsistencies rather than true variations in responsiveness. To address this, the index applies normalisation and scaling methods; however, some residual variation is unavoidable.

The Index is also shaped by the specific selection of indicators and the weightings applied. These choices, informed through stakeholder consultation, necessarily highlight certain dimensions of responsiveness over others. As such, the Index should be understood as a synthesised measure based on agreed priorities, rather than a complete representation of all system attributes. Despite these considerations, the Index remains a robust and transparent tool for tracking progress and focusing attention on the most critical areas for enhancement and improvement.

# Appendix C

## Comparator Group Analysis

### Introduction

The primary purpose of this analysis is to provide a clear, data-driven foundation for understanding SA's relative position and to identify the jurisdictions that most closely match its profile, thereby enhancing the relevance and impact of future policy decisions and performance assessments.

### Selection of Indicators

The analysis compares South Australia (SA) to other Australian jurisdictions using a suite of key indicators, including:

- Total population (ABS)
- Population aged 0–17 (AIHW, 2025)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population aged 0–17 (rate per 1,000) (AIHW, 2025)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in out-of-home care (SNAICC, 2024)
- Notifications (rate per 1,000) (AIHW, 2025)
- SEIFA IRSD socio-economic score (ABS, 2021)
- Regionality or the proportion of population residing outside metropolitan areas (Queensland Treasury, 2021)

Each indicator was chosen for its relevance to demographic, socio-economic, and child protection contexts, allowing for a comparative benchmarking exercise.

### Exclusion of ACT and Tasmania

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Tasmania (Tas) were excluded from this analysis due to their smaller populations and unique administrative and geographic profiles which can result in fluctuating or less comparable indicator values. This exclusion enables a clearer, more stable comparison between SA and the larger jurisdictions.

### Indexing Approach

To improve comparability across states and indicators with different units and scales:

- Index scores were calculated for each jurisdiction, with SA as the baseline (set at 100).
- The value for each jurisdiction is presented as an index relative to SA, allowing for standardised comparison.
- For example, a score of 160 in another jurisdiction for "% population non-metro" indicates it has 60% more than SA in that category.

### Calculating Differences

To quantify overall similarity:

- The absolute difference between each jurisdiction's score and the SA baseline (100) was calculated for every indicator.

- All differences were treated equally (in this case, an unweighted sum).
- These absolute differences were then summed across all indicators for each jurisdiction to produce a single "summed score distance" from SA value.

### Interpretation and Ranking

The smaller the summed differences the more comparable the jurisdiction is to SA in this context and based on the selected criteria. The analysis finds that the smallest total difference values are observed for Western Australia and Queensland (highlighted in green below).

### Summed Score Distances from South Australia on Selected Criteria (SA=100)

| Criterion | NSW | VIC | QLD | WA | NT |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total population | 352 | 272 | 198 | 60 | 86 |
| Population aged 0–17 | 374 | 286 | 223 | 72 | 84 |
| Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population aged 0–17 (rate per 1,000) | 40 | 61 | 70 | 31 | 640 |
| Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in OOHC | 9 | 58 | 14 | 78 | 12 |
| Notifications (rate per 1,000) | 21 | 13 | 31 | 14 | 60 |
| SEIFA IRSD socio-economic score | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 6 |
| Regionality | 60 | 11 | 132 | 8 | 75 |
| **Sum** | **858** | **704** | **669** | **266** | **963** |

### Note on Limitations

The process of selecting and using a Comparator Group to compare SA's child protection and OOHC performance is subject to the same limitations and comparability issues present in national data sources. Variations in data collection methods, definitions, reporting practices, and timeframes across jurisdictions can influence indicator values and comparability.

Additionally, underlying demographic, geographic, and policy differences among states and territories may not be fully captured by standardised indicators. As such, while the comparator analysis offers valuable context and benchmarking for SA, all findings should be interpreted with caution. Stakeholders are encouraged to consider these inherent limitations when drawing conclusions or making policy decisions based on this comparative approach.