

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

**REPORT BY
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**THE BROCKHOFF FOUNDATION CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP
An examination of the progress of Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers in the USA, UK and in the Republic of Ireland.**

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INTRODUCTION

Australian Foster Care is in crisis due to foster carers¹ leaving the care system in alarming numbers. This is coinciding with a decline in the number of individuals applying to become foster carers to the extent that in parts of Australia there is a net loss of carers. It is not unreasonable to assume that in the next 5 - 10 years up to 10,000 children and young people in Australia will be forced back into institutional or congregate care. This is not because they meet the criteria for this extremely expensive form of state care, but simply because there will not be enough capacity within the foster care programs to adequately provide for the numbers of children² requiring care.

The number of children in out of home care has risen every year over the last 10 years³. At the end of June 2008 the rate of children in out of home care was 6.2 children per 1,000 compared to a rate of 3.1 per 1,000 at the end of June 1998⁴. As of June 2008 there were 31,166 children across Australia in out of home care⁵. This is more than double the number of children living in care 10 years ago.⁶ Of these children, 95% were in Home Based Care⁷.

Whilst placing a child in out of home care is viewed as the last resort and early reunification with the family, if appropriate, is the primary focus, attachment and early brain development research calls for stable and secure placements. Every child has a right to a happy and healthy childhood filled with memories that will build their resilience for future life challenges. Many do not get this basic right with their birth families, thus high quality and competent foster carers are in demand. Foster carers play a vital role in the healing process of children and families in crisis. Where reunification is not possible, a large percentage of carers choose to care for these children long term, whilst maintaining constructive and meaningful contact and relationships with the child's families where ever possible.

The aim of this project was to explore what certain other countries - the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and the United States - are doing to increase their foster carer capacity, given they have experienced similar crises within their countries. In total I visited 4 countries, 16 agencies in 13 cities/towns, attended an International Foster Care Conference, a National Foster Carers' Conference and a Regional Training Day for Recruiting Staff in Stockport, UK. I consulted with many officials, academics, ground staff, foster carers and children in care, all of whom have contributed to the content of this report.

¹ 'Carers' means an adult or adults who have been registered or approved as Foster Parent/s

² 'Children' means a child or young person aged from 0 - 18 years.

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009.

⁴ AIHW, 2009. Child Protection Australia 2007-08. p. ix

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009. Child Protection Australia 2007-08. p. 79.

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009. Child Protection Australia 2007-08. p. ix.

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009. Child Protection Australia 2007-08. p. 80.

I wish to thank the Sir Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and the Jack Brockhoff Foundation for their trust in me to carry out this 2008 Fellowship Award. I wish to thank the Board, Executive Management Team and Hume Regional Staff at Berry Street for their support and encouragement to me during my Fellowship, especially Sandie de Wolf, CEO; Marg Hamley, Deputy CEO and to Patrice Jackson who so ably carried out the Regional Director duties in my absence. Bev Orr, Deputy Chair for Families Australia provided me with great counsel, thanks Bev. Thank you to my special friends, the Diffeys, who performed many helpful preparatory tasks and got us on the plane on the day; to the many friends I made during my Fellowship; and, to the incredibly generous and helpful staff, carers and children I met and worked with during my Fellowship. Thanks to my parents and siblings for their encouragement and support to me over the years. Above all, I wish to thank my husband Neil, our children Tracy, Chris and Kylie and their families, for without their love and support this Fellowship would not have been possible.

All of the individuals and organisations I consulted with during my Fellowship were chosen because of their expertise, experiences and integrity. Comments made in this report are not attributed to any particular individuals and all conclusions are those of the author. This report is not meant to be a comprehensive research document, but more about the many shared stories and conversations, learnings and ideas that helped shape the final recommendations of the report.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The foster care crisis highlighted in this report is not isolated to Australia. Similar issues within the foster care sector are shared across the globe, however the benefit of this Fellowship is the capacity to gather information about the cutting edge, best practice strategies being developed and implemented across the countries I visited. The recommendations in this report will give Governments and the community sector in Australia the capacity to improve the care and protection system significantly, thus creating better outcomes for children and young people in care.

In this report, I contend that a more professionalised foster care system is required in Australia. In doing so I propose that:

Developing a more professionalised foster care system in Australia will create better outcomes for children in care because:

1. Carers will have increased formal, nationally accredited training that will better equip them to deal with the increasing complexities of caring in the 21st century
2. Carers will have increased delegations and authority that will enable timely day to day decisions and actions for the children in their care.
3. Carers will have increased accountability for their role as carers, resulting in an increase in quality of care.

Developing a more professionalised foster care system in Australia will create better opportunities to recruit carers because:

1. Carers will receive a fair payment for the work they do, separate from the allowance a child will receive for his/her living expenses.
2. The rate of income for a carer will be such that individuals who currently work in other professions will be attracted to the carer role.
3. The improvement of conditions in the system will be more attractive to someone who had been considering foster care for some time, but was put off due to negative stories or financial liabilities.
4. There is an opportunity to consider foster caring as an optional career to work inside the home rather than a career outside the home.

Developing a more professionalised foster care system in Australia will create better retention of carers because:

1. Carers will be operating in an improved system where they receive fair pay for the work they do; receive appropriate support and resources for the child in their care and their own family; and, are respected in their role.
2. Carers will have experienced professional development and training that has benefited them and the children in their care.
3. Carers will have received appropriate independent support, advice and mediation during allegations of abuse or times of conflict.

Implementation and Dissemination: These recommendations will be presented to relevant State and Federal Government officials and Peak Bodies. The information in the report will be used as the basis for presentations, media articles and speeches.

FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

DATE	ORGANISATION
<p>09.06.09 to 13.06.09</p>	<p>New Haven, Connecticut, USA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annie E Casey Foundation, Casey Family Services • Connecticut Association of Foster & Adoptive Parents (CAFAP) <p>Boston, Massachusetts, USA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Massachusetts Adoption Research Exchange (MARE) <p>Bridgeport, Connecticut, USA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Casey Family Services, Regional Service
<p>13.06.09 to 17.06.09</p>	<p>New York, New York, USA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Madelyn Freundlich, Excal Consulting Partners • New York City on Adoptable Children (NY COAC) • Residential Facility, Abbott House <p>Yonkers, New York, USA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Andrus Children's Centre
<p>22.06.09 to 27.06.09</p>	<p>London, UK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Fostering Network (TFN) • Sons & Daughters Program (TFN) • British Agency for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF) • Essex County Council • Training Workshop - Recruitment & Retention - Stockport • Conference - Achievement & Aspirations, Foster Care in the 21st Century.
<p>29.06.09 to 03.07.09</p>	<p>The Midlands - Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, UK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Foster Care Associates • Foster Talk <p>Manchester, UK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Foster Care Associates • Visit Foster Carer
<p>06.07.09 to 10.07.09</p>	<p>Glasgow, Scotland, UK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Fostering Network • Foster Care Associates
<p>13.07.09 to 17.07.09</p>	<p>Dublin, Ireland, Republic of Ireland</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conference - International Foster Care Organisation (IFCO)
<p>13.07.09 to 17.07.09</p>	<p>Dublin, Ireland, Republic of Ireland</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robbie Gilligan - Trinity College • Irish Foster Care Association • Fostering First Ireland

4. FINDINGS

4.1 THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Foster care in Australia is the responsibility of State Government jurisdictions. Prior to the most recent change of Commonwealth Government the Commonwealth had very limited involvement in foster care issues. Since the Rudd Government was elected the Commonwealth has led the development of a National Child Protection Framework⁸ and now provides opportunities for National approaches to foster care and other associated issues.

Recruitment of foster carers is an issue of national concern with most agencies across Australia experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining foster carers. The reasons include, but are not exclusive to:

- Increase of women in the workforce
- Increased need for double incomes in families
- Inadequacy of reimbursements to carers
- Increased complexity of children requiring care - challenging behaviours and specific needs
- Inadequate support for carers; a perceived lack of respect for carers' skills, and knowledge and recognition of the difficulty of the caring role
- Fear of the unknown amongst prospective carers in the community - often impacted on by negative media coverage of children who require care
- Fear of potential or actual false allegations of abuse
- Increased complexity of the system which surrounds out-of-home care - resulting in higher workloads and less time for workers to support placements.

The decrease of interest in becoming a carer has resulted in more carers leaving the system than new carers entering the system, at around 7% per year in Victoria alone. There was more than a 40% decline of carers from 97/98 to 01/02 in Victoria.⁹ Concurrently, the carer cohort is ageing, with the average age of carers increasing from 24 - 45 in 1986; to 35 - 54 in 2004. In addition to this, the number of children in care continues to rise annually with a 56% increase in Victoria alone from 1996 - 2004.¹⁰

This change in carer availability has put the foster care system into crisis and resulted in: an increase in multiple placements; an inability to ideally 'match' children with carers leading to an increase in the number of placement breakdowns; carer burnout; and dissatisfaction with the service/system. This is occurring at the same time the latest research into early brain development, trauma and attachment has highlighted the need for stability and consistency in placements. This is increasingly concerning for the potential quality of care options available to some of our most vulnerable children.

⁸ National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020.

⁹ Strengthening the Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers Victoria, *Centre for Excellence in Child & Family Welfare*.

¹⁰ Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy, May 2008. *Successworks*.

However, a gradual change in practice to respond to research has recognised children are staying in care longer¹¹ and more timely permanent decisions are being made for children. This has produced a catch 22 situation because this positive change in practice is having a converse effect on placement options as carers become less available to provide new placements due to the lengthier stays of children already in their care.

The profile of foster carers has changed over the last decade with the increase of women in the full time labour force having the major impact. Recruitment campaigns are now often targeted toward particular demographic sections of the community who, over the last decade have shown more interest in becoming a carer. Some of the significant changes in the profile include, but are not exclusive to:

- Single females who are mostly in their middle years
- Professional couples in paid work
- Same sex couples.

This change in carer profile will necessitate a change in how we provide support to carers. Single carers, families where the single parent or both parents work, and the increasing incidence of multiple placements all mean that additional support will be required to sustain these placements and carers and prevent early burnout and placement breakdowns.

The provision of on-going training and professional development for carers may occur in a range of ways. Currently training is primarily provided via traditional methods of face to face training in groups. In contrast, electronic learning, networking and support between foster carers is very common overseas. These forms are also gathering interest in Australia, but are largely unresourced at present.

Foster carers in Australia are volunteers and receive a reimbursement or subsidy to partially cover the costs of caring for a child. The reimbursement or subsidy is set to cover general living expenses for the child but does not include a payment to carers for the skilled work they do in providing a specialist service to the child in their care. Thus, it is not an attractive incentive for someone who may be interested in making foster caring a career. Reimbursements are not consistent across Australia with large variations across the States and Territories¹².

Provision of pre-service training and on-going professional development for carers is also varied across the nation. Across and within the states the standard of pre-service training ranges from informal 1:1 training through to nationally accredited competency based training. On-going training and development is determined by the agencies and in some states the peak bodies.

¹¹ *'Getting the big picture': A synopsis and critique of Australian out-of-home care research, 2007.* Bromfield, L; Osborn, A. Australian government, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

¹² Australian Foster Care Association. 2008. Comparison of state and territory foster care payments 2000-2008.

As volunteers, carers are generally not ‘mandated’ to attend on-going training and neither is there a ‘formal’ link between levels of competency/training and carer’s re-imburement.¹³

Most states and territories in Australia have a Foster Care Association that provides support and advocacy for foster carers at varying levels. Funding for the Associations differs with most being funded from State Governments. State associations in Australia are not resourced adequately to provide independent advocacy, support and mediation to carers at the same level as overseas services. Whilst state associations do their best on the limited funding they receive, the service to carers is left inadequate, in my view.

There is also an Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA). AFCA is a not for profit organisation committed to supporting and representing the views of all carers, their families and the children they care for at a national level. It has established links throughout the family services sector and often works in partnership with specific organisations, agencies, researchers and professionals, at a national level to provide support, training and advocacy. It provides information and support services using volunteers and draws together evidence at a national level to assist in lobbying and advocating for all carers across the nation, however this organisation receives no funding from any government. A well funded national association is best suited to undertake national data collection, research, reviews, resource materials and publications that would benefit foster carers and service providers throughout the country. Having a government funded national body would provide an opportunity to focus on the needs of carers only, and in particular, the issues that impact carers across the country irrespective of the jurisdiction they live in.

4.2 FINDINGS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

4.2.1 Background of Interest

The National Foster Care Coalition was established in 1998 to *build and sustain political and public will, to improve the foster care system and the lives of the children and youth in its care* (2009). This was preceded by the signing of the *Fostering Connection to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections, Public Law 110-351)* into law, by President George W Bush on October 7, 2008.

The coalition is focused solely on foster care as opposed to other more generic child welfare organisations. A focal point of the coalition is its advocacy for all parties involved in foster care and especially the children and young people in foster care.

The coalition was concerned following numerous research projects that demonstrated many youth leave care without a family or significant others to rely on. Research indicates these youth are more likely to experience poverty,

¹³ McHugh, M.; McNab,J.; Smyth,C.; Chalmers,J.; Siminski,P. and Saunders, P. (2004) *The Availability of Foster Carers*.

homelessness, incarceration, and mental or physical illness and lack life and educational skills to live a meaningful life.¹⁴

The coalition produced the document cited above as a means of providing information for youth, judges, court and child welfare agency administrators and personnel, legislators and their staff, parents, relative carers and others who advocate for youth in care.

The Guiding Principles of the coalition are:

- Emphasis on Permanency - a commitment to plan for a timely permanent outcome for the child: re-unification with family; placement with kith or kin; or independent living with support and strong linkages to community;
- Youth as Engaged Participants and Key Decision Makers;
- Inclusivity;
- Flexibility to Allow for Re-entry;
- Collaborative Approaches to Promote Health, Mental Health, Education, Housing and Workforce Readiness;
- Developmentally Appropriate Services; and
- Evidence Based and Outcome Monitoring.

Some members of the coalition such as Casey Family Services (CFS), have undergone major reforms within their foster care programs in a commitment to ensure children and youth receive a more meaningful and successful outcome in care which has a primary focus on permanency. For CFS this resulted in changes to recruitment strategies for the recruitment of permanent carers. For some agencies in the United States, their core business is the recruitment of permanent carers who work in partnership with service delivery agencies. Other agencies have responsibility for both recruitment and placement of children awaiting permanent placement or adoption, but will also refer 'ready for permanent care' clients for matching to agencies whose business it is to only recruit.

Casey Family Services and partners, initiated ***A Call to Action: An Integrated Approach to Youth Permanence and Preparation for Adulthood*** to address the complex needs unique to young people in foster care.¹⁵

In understanding the need for change, this agency aimed to address the issue of 'ageing out'¹⁶ youth in care. Casey Family Services was traditionally a long term foster care agency, however 5 years ago it made a decision to change direction in order to achieve greater family permanence and a more comprehensive preparation for adulthood for their youth in care. A practice approach to change ensued to assist in their capacity to implement the "Call to Action".

¹⁴ Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, FAQ: Youth and Young Adults Provisions. *National Foster Care Coalition, 2009.*

¹⁵ ***A Call to Action: An Integrated Approach to Youth Permanence and Preparation for Adulthood.*** Casey Family Services et al. (2005, reprinted 2007)

¹⁶ Ageing Out means youth are discharged to 'self' rather than to a family or significant other they can rely on to assist them in everyday life.

4.2.2 Recruitment

Casey Family Services recruitment strategies involved ‘family finding’, an approach to seeking kith or kin from within the client files. Every person who was involved in the child’s life in some positive form was contacted and invited to be a part of the process to locate a family. This approach is known as a Permanent Teaming Model and involves a social worker using individual, joint and large team meetings over a period of time, to address the child’s need for permanency.¹⁷ This may be through family reunification, kin or kith placements, permanency or legal adoption orders.

Within the first 3 years of the new model operating, 57% of children are obtaining permanency within the first 18 months or less of commencing the process. This particular agency exceeded their target in recruiting carers including general recruitment and family finding as mentioned above.

In the parts of the United States I visited, State Government is responsible for the major recruitment drives for foster carers. However, the majority of foster care agencies would then ride on the back of those campaigns with a major campaign of their own. From the discussions I had with the agencies I visited, it appears that larger agencies have the most success at recruiting, especially when they had a ‘whole of agency’ approach to recruitment. This may include utilising their Community Relations and Human Resources teams and other program staff within their agencies, who include promoting foster care during their own program activities.

Long standing agencies who have established credibility within the state/country use the integrity of their agency as a part of the marketing approach to recruitment. Agencies who had successful campaigns over a longer period of time and were exceeding their recruitment targets, had very detailed and comprehensive Recruitment Strategies in place. Recruitment Strategies included targeting specific audiences, use of carers and young people in care, use of sons and daughters of carers, promoting the agency’s integrity, use of a multi-level marketing campaign and use of the Internet. Many agencies have a ‘heart gallery’ in their offices which display photos of children who are on a ‘ready for adoption’ order. A group of young people I met informed me it was the staff’s responsibility to find them a family if they chose that pathway. They further informed me that they didn’t mind an open advertising approach to find families for them, they just wanted the end result. Whilst I found this approach personally challenging, it clearly works in obtaining permanent placements for children, and from the many conversations around this issue, it creates better long term outcomes for youth in care.

Most of the agencies I visited in the US spoke about the importance of partnering with the corporate sector to engage with staff who may be interested in fostering. Corporate organisations would take part in a recruitment campaign by committing to having speakers, brochures and publications on site in their offices for the duration of the campaign. Some corporates would sponsor a Community Service Announcement as a partner.

¹⁷ *Permanency Teaming, Achieving Families for Life*. Casey Family Services.

4.2.3 Retention

State Foster Care Associations play a large part in recruitment, support, training and mediation. The Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents (CAFAP) is a non-profit organization and is funded by both State and Federal governments. CAFAP is committed to strengthening foster and adoptive families and relative caregivers. The organisation, in partnership with child welfare professionals, provides support, training and advocacy to nurture child safety, wellbeing and stability.

The scope of CAFAP and other similar associations includes training, support, advocacy and outreach. The CAFAP receives 20,000 calls per year across the state of Connecticut and is the largest carer organisation in the country. The Association has 15 staff located in regional centres across the state. The outreach model is extremely successful and provides an additional 'layer' of support to carers. Each of the outreach staff provides components of the scope of the organisation at a regional level. The CAFAP outreach worker receives referrals from the carers, social workers and the Department of Child and Families.

Carer feedback indicates that having an independent Association is at times what keeps them going when the going gets tough. Carers noted some of the important factors for them in caring:

- Having staff who return their calls
- Staff carrying out the child's plan - connecting kids to their therapeutic meetings, medical assessments etc
- Staff respecting the role and expertise of carers who provide 24/7 care for the child
- Up-front feedback to carers
- Being prepared to listen to carers who are at the end of their tether without carers feeling they will be 'punished' for being honest.

Carers noted that prior to enquiring about fostering they considered a number of important areas that had been promoted in the recruitment campaign, for example:

- Carer reimbursement
- Child care subsidies
- Pre and post service training
- Social opportunities
- Conference attendance
- 24/7 support.

REIMBURSEMENT / CARER PAYMENT

Foster care payments in the states I visited in the US are varied. Generally there are three main 'component's of care - General Care; Therapeutic, which includes Medically Complex and Treatment; and Professional Care. In the main, carers receive a foster care allowance for the child based on the United States Department of Agriculture estimated expenditures on a child. In addition to this, carers can receive additional rates for children with complex medical needs and subsidises guardianship and adoption fees. In the areas I visited, there was a

gradual move toward payments to carers based on a fee for service rate which would be taxed and separate to an 'allowance' for the child, based on the estimated expenditures for a child as mentioned above.

SUPPORT / RESOURCES

Both Therapeutic and Professional care have 'wrap around' services that include: clinical, educational, recreational and family linking workers. Professional carers are expected to take the extremely high risk taking children, those at the high end of the service system who require out-of-home based care. In these placements it is mandated that one of the adult carers must be at home to respond to any day to day crises.

Agency staff are responsible for providing support and resources to the caring family. The level of support to carers includes 24 hours support, weekly visits, weekly psychologist consultations (Therapeutic and Professional Care), and professional development - on going training, in addition to a range of other supports as required by carers.

Carers' comments on what is important to them as carers included:

- Carer reimbursement - fair pay for the work they do
- Professional support to the children in their care
- post service training
- 24/7 support
- Independent mediation and support, e.g. CAFAP
- Be treated as an equal part of the fostering team and have opportunities to contribute
- Regular respite during complex placements.

One carer commented...“... fostering is extremely hard work due to the complexity of the child or young person coming into care. At times we get to the point where we are at our wits end, not knowing what to do next for the child, or becoming extremely frustrated with the behaviour of the child to the point where we know we are not responding in a 'therapeutic' manner to the child. ... the relationship we have with our worker might not be one where we feel confident enough to share this information with them without feeling vulnerable, in that we fear our social worker will think we are not suitable to continue. What we want is to be able to share our feelings with a compassionate soul who will not misunderstand, but acknowledge our feelings and give us the encouragement to keep going...”

TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

All carers have pre-service training and generally carers are expected to undertake 24 hours of additional training each year. Training and Professional Development may take the form of:

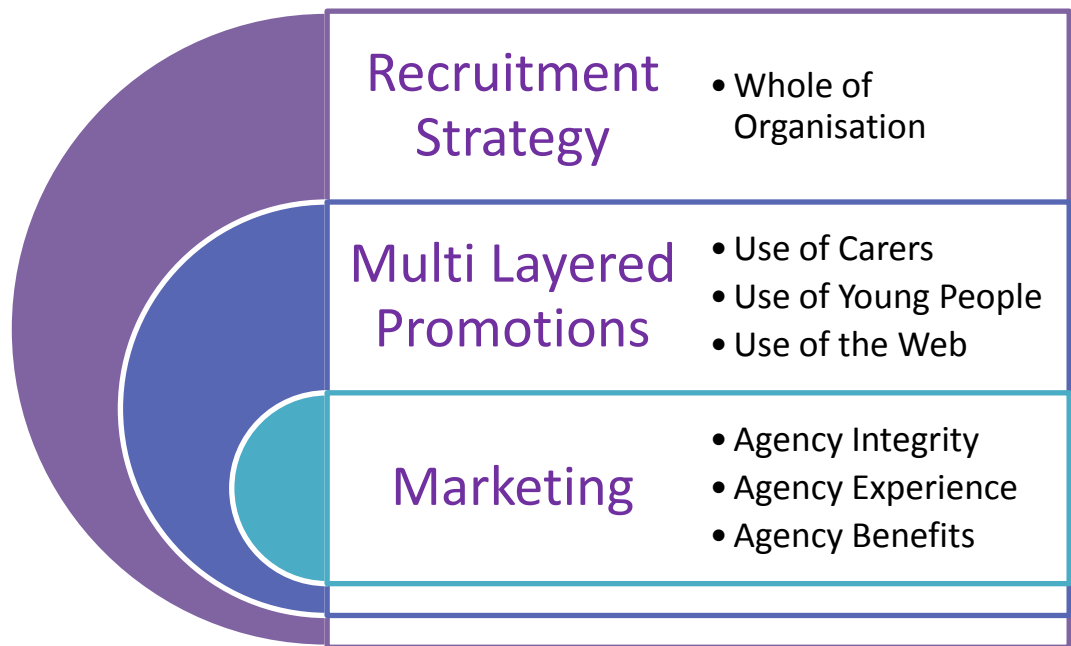
- Face to face training;
- On line training;
- Supervision;
- Provision of specific documents to read as requested by either the carer or worker.

There are a range of on-line training options available to carers including a Foster Parent College. Agencies facilitate on line learning opportunities for their carers and form partnerships with web based training groups to minimize the costs. The level of training and competency assessed of carers by their agency pre determines the level of difficulty of child that will be placed with the carers, thus if a carer wants to do more difficult types of care, they in turn will be required to undertake more hours of training than a carer who is only interested in general foster care.

4.2.4 Critical Learnings and Areas for Discussion in Australia

Carer reimbursements, resources and supports are heavily linked to successful recruitment and retention of carers in the United States. If carers feel valued in their role, they will work through the challenges and complexities of the fostering system. If carers are provided with suitable compensation for the work they do in fostering, receive appropriate resources and support and have appropriate delegated authority, they will last longer in the system. The longer they last in the system the more it helps with recruitment, because word of mouth is one of the most successful forms of recruitment.

- Recruitment
 - Agencies that had developed a comprehensive organisational **Strategic Plan** for the recruitment of foster carers were meeting or surpassing their target for additional carers. There were challenges for large agencies making statements to guarantee specific supports and resources when clearly there are regional differences, however this was beneficial and added value to the idea of ‘selling’ the agency.
 - A number of carers indicated the importance of knowing **what the benefits include** for them in fostering. Agencies then based their ‘marketing’ around ensuring that information was included in the recruitment campaign. For example they would advertise what their ‘wrap around services’ included - education support, clinician consultations etc.
 - Being **clear about whom we are targeting** and aim our recruitment activities directly at them. For example, if the target is young mums - be at supermarkets weekly - not just twice a year, conversely if it is working women / couples, engage with the corporate sector. Ensure the slogan and information on the promotional materials is suitable to the target.



- Retention
 - **Independent support, mediation and advocacy** for carers. When carers were asked to identify specific areas of support that kept them in the system, this was one of the common responses.
 - **Provision of ‘wrap around’ services** for the child in care. Carers get frustrated when they see the child in their care waiting neglectfully for services. Carers suggest this frustration at times leads to a sense of hopelessness for not only the child but the carers as well and adds to their burnout.



4.3 FINDINGS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM and THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

4.3.1 Issues that led to the need for change

In the United Kingdom - England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - Foster care is provided by Local Authorities, Trusts and Independent Fostering Providers. Following a crisis in foster care in the 1990's¹⁸, the UK National Standards for Foster Care and Code of Practice on the Recruitment, Assessment, Approval, Training, Management and Support of Foster Carers was developed in 1999. Fostering Services Regulations and National Minimum Standards followed in 2002. These standards have shaped the service delivery of foster care in the UK and led the way towards a new vision for foster care in 2009. For a number of decades now there has been a 'trend' to move towards a more professionalised approach to Foster Care. This was very evident during my visits in the UK and The Republic of Ireland.

Attending the International Foster Care Organisation Conference was the primary focus during my time in the Republic of Ireland. "*Health of the Foster Care System is dependant on the health of the Child Protection System*", Dr. Helen Buckley stated in her opening Plenary to the conference. It was reported that the context for change in Ireland was the agenda for Children's Services and it's framework; the Ryan Report; recent inquiry reports and audits; and, recognition of the need for standardization and compliance with good practice standards.

4.3.2 The need for change

The Fostering Network (TFN) and others are taking a lead role in the UK and the Republic of Ireland in advocating for reform within the foster care system to develop a more professional system that will improve and acknowledge the major contribution foster care has to the outcomes of children in care. A professional system will also increase recruitment and retention capacity, with more benefits for foster carers and their families which in turn becomes a more attractive option for a career path.

The Fostering Network, a not for profit organisation, evolved originally from the National Foster Care Association which was founded in 1974 by a group of foster carers with the purpose of improving services for children in care. In 1979 the NFCA hosted the first international conference, which ultimately resulted in the establishment of the International Foster Care Organisation (IFCO). Following the major crisis in foster care in the late 1990's and the development of new National Standards, the renaming of TFN commenced.

Today there are more children living in care than ever before in the UK. Currently there are around 72,500 children and young people in care on any given day. More than 51,000 live with 43,000 foster carers. It is estimated that an additional 10,000 foster carers are needed in the UK at this time.¹⁹

¹⁸ "*Foster Care in Crisis*", National Foster Care Association, 1997

¹⁹ "*Foster Care - a manifesto for change*", The Fostering Network. 2008

Similar to other countries, the complexities for foster carers has increased over the years to meet the increased needs of those requiring care when the numbers of carers has been diminishing. *“Where initially foster care was thought of as a charitable act,.... one undertaken by women volunteers who had the time, space and commitment to look after other people’s children, this is no longer the case and the pool of foster carers as a volunteer workforce has slowly diminished...”*²⁰

Like other countries, including Australia, as new Standards are introduced more demands are made of carers in a professional sense. Carers are expected to provide reports to agencies/local authorities, daily accounts of the children’s activities, attend meetings on a more regular basis, have the capacity to understand complex theories relative to the issues of children requiring care and deal with the police and other statutory services. In addition to this they are required to provide quality personalised care 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for a child that is not their own in a way that maximizes the safety of the child and themselves. This is expected of carers who in the main are volunteers and who have not had the level of training required to manage the rising complexities of children requiring care, or the required resources available to assist the children in obtaining best outcomes.²¹

It is argued by UK carer support agencies that a professional foster care system will recognise the carer as a key partner in the team surrounding the child, with particular responsibilities that will have equal validity and importance along with other sections of children’s workforce - child care, pre-school, Maternal Child Health etc. The view is that the term professional has two meanings:

1. a description of a task, usually work, and it marks a distinction from a voluntary or amateur approach, and
2. is used to distinguish between occupational groups and is associated with some form of licensing and qualification.²²

As a first step towards a more professionalised approach to foster care in the UK, foster carers are required to have the same core competencies as that of other child care workers. This was undertaken during the recent childcare workforce reform. In essence, in order for foster carers to be eligible to apply to foster, they must have a Children’s Workforce Development Council or Scottish Social Services Council qualification²³. Their competency based pre service and on going training adds to this qualification, and includes an on site assessment of their skills within the carers home.

4.3.3 Recruitment

In the UK and Northern Ireland recruitment is shared by Local Authorities, Carer Support Groups and Independent Providers. Primarily, Carer Support Groups will undertake major recruitment campaigns of which independent providers will share

²⁰ *“Towards a professional foster care system”*, The Fostering Network, 2000

²¹ *The Cost Of Foster Care - Investing In Our Children’s Future*. Tapsfield, R; Collier, F., 2005

²² *Towards a professional foster care system”*, The Fostering Network, 2000

²³ *Training Support and Development Standards for Foster Care (CWDC, 2007)*

the benefits, by following on with their own campaign. Google Adwords is very popular in Northern Ireland as it is in Scotland. One agency suggested that TV and radio have high costs with minimal returns with enquiries generating around 50% from newspapers, 30% internet, 20% word of mouth.

I found these agencies would utilise their caring families for recruitment activities more than we tend to in Australia. Carers are central in most of the recruitment, training and assessment process of carers and receive a payment for the varied activities.

Over 75% of agencies have recruitment strategies and 70% have specific recruitment targets to reach. More than half of the agencies have dedicated recruitment staff with a marketing background. Agencies dedicate between AU\$40,000 - 80,000 to spend on promotional activities annually. TFN reports the costs to recruit a new foster carer who reaches the stage of registration as AU\$22,000.

Recruitment strategies include making use of the Internet and being constantly creative about promoting fostering by utilising clever marketing knowledge. Negative media is cited as the biggest hindrance to recruitment, so a major strategy to re-educate the media began in 2002 resulting in a major theme for each year since. Independent agencies that I spoke with in the UK are having good successes with their recruitment and focus on the 'benefits' carers can be guaranteed from their agency. Additionally they market their years of experience (if appropriate), their code of practice and theoretical underpinnings of their work.

4.3.4 Retention

I had the great fortune to speak with many carers whilst I was in the UK, attending a Foster Carers conference specifically for foster carers in addition to meeting some carers individually organised by agencies. My constant question to carers - especially carers who had been caring for some years and had during that period, experienced many difficulties from within the system - was, ***why are you still caring?*** Whilst there were a range of reasons offered, there were 4 commonalities that carers spoke of:

1. ***Payment*** - fair payment which means they have enough to cover mortgage payments and do not need to have a job outside the home, thus allowing them to focus on fostering and caring for the child's needs.
2. ***Support and Respect*** - Agency staff support and respect was the most crucial element of retention. Carers in the UK are very focused on the legislation and the requirements expected of them as carers. They take their responsibility very seriously and in turn expect to have their knowledge, expertise and experience respectfully accepted and a major contributor to the professional team. Many spoke of the need for 'whole of family' support. Carers from one agency said they value the support they receive and really enjoy the monthly support groups; social events for kids and carers; certificates of recognition for kids in care, sons and daughters

and carers; annual camps; newsletters; recognition of significant birthdays; and, taking a personal interest in the whole family.

3. **Resources** - It was very obvious from the many carers I had conversations with, that they are genuinely focused on the best interests of the child and their responsibility in contributing to best practice. Therefore, one of the important factors for carers was the resources that would be available to them and the child in their care that would enable best practice to occur. Independent providers have “wrap around services” - specialist education, recreation, clinical supports - for the children in care which means the children get the attention they need immediately rather than waiting to get appointments with professionals outside the system. Carers also spoke about additional supports their agencies provide, including resources that are developed in-house by specialist staff, for example materials and workbooks that assist carers in developing life story books; independent living plans and tasks; and building resilience.
4. **Independent mediation and support services.** In the UK there are independent support services like The Fostering Network and Foster Talk that provide independent mediation for their carers during difficult times, for example during an allegation made against carers. Independent Providers pay a registration fee for their carers to belong to the support service which is a part of their support package to carers.

Carers mentioned these were among the things that made them feel appreciated, important and valued as a carer and increased their optimism for a better future for the child in their care. Carers discussed the notion that when their colleagues lose a sense of optimism in the system, this is when they are most likely to leave the system.

4.3.5 Critical Learnings and Areas for Discussion in Australia

It seems reasonable to assume that in order to expand on the capacity to recruit and maintain carers in larger numbers we need to address the issues of who we are trying to recruit: what we are recruiting them for; and what the ‘stressors’ are that contribute to carers leaving in large numbers. There are volumes of research available to provide advice about this, many cited in this document and others cited through the references.

Potential carers are required to manage complex systems and child behaviours in addition to implementing treatment plans developed by a care team whilst working closely with clinical staff and other support professionals. Carers are required to be available in an outreach capacity to respond to a crisis the child may be experiencing during the activities on any given time during the day. It is evident from the visits and reviewing the many documents available, the system requires individuals who have the capacity to undertake formal competency based training and/or who have other forms of qualifications relative to the requirements of a foster carer.

Moving toward a “professionalised foster care system” will no doubt bring many challenges within Australia, however there are some learnings from overseas experience. For example In Australia we would need to explore the tax implications and the related issues arising from creating a system of “paid” carers. One overseas example is, carers are paid a tax free allowance for the child in their care and are paid a taxable “Fee for Service” for the work they do in working with the child/ren in care. Carers were self employed and were contracted by an agency to provide the service. The contract included, among other requirements, the professional development requirements in order for carers to maintain their contract.

In the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland carers have crucial services and supports available to them that are not available to carers in Australia at the same level. As an example, there are agencies whose **only business** it is to: provide independent mediation and support to carers; advocate to government on their behalf; undertake evaluation and research projects to inform policy and practice improvement; provide insurance that will cover legal and personal support costs during allegations; assist agencies to develop recruitment strategic plans; develop training and information material for carers, etc. The agencies that provide the supports to carers are only providing this service which, in my view, avoids other business **getting in the way** of supporting carers, who view these services as fundamental to their “resilience” as carers. My view is that our state foster care associations are not funded adequately to provide services that are comparable to overseas associations. Whilst being sensitive to the hard work and commitment by current state associations, a revisit to what is required by foster carers in the 21st century would be helpful in reconceptualising the scope of foster care associations in the future.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Foster care is a crucial component of our child and welfare system in Australia for the protection and care of children, who are not able to live with their family of origin for varying periods of time. There is no 'quick fix' to the declining number of foster care placement options, however there is great capacity via major reforms to change the current situation. This will have significant benefits for the quality of care and improved outcomes for children in care. There is agreement across the countries I visited that an improved, more professionalised foster care system will: create an increase in capacity; improve the therapeutic approaches to care; attract a wider target group of professionals to the system; create a more informed and professionally trained work force among carers; and create better options and outcomes for children in the system.



In the recruitment of foster carers, if the system is to compete with other helping or child care professionals, it stands to reason the system requires a reform. In a reformed system carers would be paid for their service in addition to receiving an allowance for the child's living expenses, making a change to their status; they would have access to resources to meet the needs of the child, the child's family, the carers and the carer's family; the carers' delegation and authority would be enhanced to allow them to make day to day decisions for the child, be informed about all aspects of the child's circumstances and statutory decision making processes; improved processes and timelines in addressing allegations and; improved pathways to professional development and training; and increased resources and support to the caring family. In a reformed foster care system, individuals would be more likely to become foster carers and in turn, would stay in the system longer.

Overall Recommendation

Australia requires a national reform of its foster care system with Governments increasing the investment in foster care services. The following recommendations incorporate critical aspects of a reformed system:

Recommendation 1

Australian foster carers should be paid an allowance for children in care that covers the full cost of caring for a child.

An allowance for a child in care is the basic costs for living expenses and should be guided by Australian research undertaken to determine the average costs of raising a child. This should be a set fee that is consistent across the nation and is maintained by adding the full value of the Consumer Price Index.

Recommendation 2

Australian foster carers should be paid a fee for service for their skill and the work they do in caring for a child in their own home.

Foster carers are a crucial component of the professional team who work to protect and care for children. In order to attract quality foster carers and compete against other child care and caring professions the fee for service must be comparable to those other professions. The fee for service must be adequate to cover the cost of an average moderate mortgage repayment.

Recommendation 3

The Federal Government and Peak Bodies in Australia should work together to develop a framework for training that is comparable to other child care workforce occupations. This should include mandatory on-going competency based training and professional development as a part of carers' ongoing registration.

In order for foster carers to manage the changing complex needs of children coming into care today, they require high quality training prior to, and during, their caring years, to maximise the best outcomes for the children in their care. Whilst most states now have standardised pre-service training, there is no capacity to mandate on-going professional development. The training framework must be linked to formal qualifications which could commence at a Certificate IV entry level followed by pathways to further formal education.

Recommendation 4

Federal Government and Peak Bodies in Australia should, in collaboration with existing state Foster Care Associations, undertake a project to reconceptualise and strengthen its state-wide Foster Care Associations.

Overseas experience strongly indicates Foster Care Associations in Australia are not funded adequately to provide the level of resources and support required by foster carers. Foster carer feedback suggests this area of support is crucial to them and is often the lynch pin for them continuing to care, especially following a difficult experience. State-wide Foster Care Associations are best suited to provide independent support, advocacy, mediation and promotion of foster carers within their state.

Recommendation 5

Australian Governments should set a unit cost for foster care that includes “wrap around” services to enable positive outcomes for the children in their care.

There are examples of best practice across Australia that demonstrates enhanced outcomes for children in care where there have been additional funds to support specialist interventions and supports during placements. These include but are not exclusive of:

- Special clinician services
- Educational workers
- Recreational support workers
- Community and family linking workers.

Recommendation 6

Community Service Organisations providing foster care should have a strategic plan for recruitment that includes a target of “additional” carers for each year. Australian and overseas research strongly suggests the importance of agencies developing a strategic plan for their recruitment of foster carers. Agencies’ targets must include an annual net gain of carers each calendar year. Without this there will be no advancement on the declining number of carers.

Recommendation 7

Community Service Organisations and Peak Bodies should lobby to Federal Government for a government funded national Australian Foster Care Association.

A national Association is best placed to undertake evaluation and research projects to inform policy and practice improvement; provide insurance that will cover legal and personal support costs during allegations; advocate to government on behalf of foster carers and in collaboration with state associations, collect and analyse data specific to foster care.