



Solving the Foster Care

Conundrum

A Call to Action

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Solving the Foster Care Conundrum

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The ideas in this Monograph have been inspired by foster carers, children in care, case workers, government officials & academics. We acknowledge the enormous contribution of all the people who play a role in the foster care system in Australia, and internationally.

Preface

My commitment to foster care in Victoria spans nearly four decades. In the late 1970s my husband Neil and I became foster carers and over the following five years, fifteen precious children and young people joined our family. Since the mid-1980s I have had the privilege of working with children in foster care and their carers through a range of practitioner, leadership and advisory roles in government and the community sector. Through this long personal and professional journey, my passion to make a real difference for children in foster care has never wavered.

However, all has not been well for children who need the care and support of foster parents. Despite all the dedicated work of thousands of carers and foster care programs, foster care in Australia is in a state of crisis. More carers have been leaving the system than are entering at a time when the number of children in care continues to rise. Without

significant change, the future of foster care has been looking increasingly precarious.

In 2008, the Sir Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and the Jack Brockhoff Foundation gave me the opportunity to seek solutions. Specifically, my Brockhoff Foundation Churchill Fellowship enabled me to conduct research into best practice in foster care recruitment and retention across three countries. I was able to engage in meaningful discussions with international experts who had been grappling with similar challenges and had found ways to avert the crisis. I returned to Australia with renewed determination to achieve change.

Much has flowed directly from my Churchill Fellowship. In 2010 Berry Street significantly increased its commitment to the development of new models of foster care. This commitment and associated activity was then a catalyst for substantial philanthropic support

to establish a stronger foster care system in Australia. A three year project culminated in the development of a report co-authored by Berry Street and the University of New South Wales- Reforming the Foster Care System in Australia: A New Model of Support, Education and Payment for Foster Parents.

The wisdom gained through my Churchill Fellowship has formed the basis for advocacy at many levels. Knowledge has been widely shared with carers, case workers, researchers and policy makers through conference presentations and publications; strategic meetings have been held with government officials and Ministers; and the case for a new model of foster care has been prosecuted through the media. In the lead up to the 2014 Victorian State election, Berry Street in partnership with the Foster Care Association of Victoria launched the Save Foster Care Campaign and this advocacy continues.

This Monograph summarises what I learned as I visited agencies across the United States of America, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland and highlights what this learning means for foster care in Australia. But more than that, it is a Call to Action. I believe fervently that developing a truly professional foster care system in Australia will create better outcomes for children in care. Together with my colleagues, I call on governments across Australia to create a better system of caring for our most vulnerable children!



Anita Pell
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A Call to Action

Foster care in Australia is in a state of crisis. Over the past five years, many more families have left the foster care system than have volunteered to become carers. Financial stress on carers has continued to grow and many carers are reporting feeling disrespected by a system that fails to recognise their knowledge, and fails to fully support them in their role.

Foster carers in Victoria, as just one example, are provided with some financial support for the costs incurred in the day-to-day care of foster children, however:

- The gap between the foster care allowance provided by the Department of Health and Human Services and the actual cost of caring for a child is now as much as \$5,356 per year. The financial cost of fostering is deterring as many as 60% of potential carers.
- 610 foster carers left the Victorian system in the last year, while only 400 new carers could be recruited¹.
- Reports to Child Protection are increasing and many more vulnerable young children are being placed into Residential Care.

Across Australia, the outlook is similarly grim. National action must be taken, and this monograph looks at how the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and the United States are handling the challenge given that they have all experienced a similar crisis.

¹Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, Child protection Australia 2013- 2014

Based on research carried out by Anita Pell as part of a 2008 Fellowship Award, supported by the Sir Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and the Jack Brockhoff Foundation, the report stands as a testament to the strength and purpose of these awards, and the lasting power of sharing stories, conversations, learning and ideas on a global basis.

Informed in part by the international experience, Berry Street, The Foster Care Association of Victoria and other foster care agencies are calling on government to:

- Increase reimbursements to meet the day-to-day costs of caring for children
- Ensure that all of a child's education, medical and recreational expenses are met by the Department of Health and Human Services in a timely fashion
- Implement and fund a coordinated, carer recruitment and retention program
- Improve access to training, support and respite for all foster carers
- Advocate to the Commonwealth that they remove income tests from carers' access to benefits for children in foster and kinship care.

Further information can be found at www.savefostercare.org.au

What Australia can learn from the UK, Ireland and US experience

In the last ten years, the number of children living in out-of-home care in Australia has more than doubled². This fact alone is distressing given the reasons why a child's removal from their family is generally deemed necessary. What's even more concerning is that fewer people are applying to become foster carers and existing carers are leaving the system at an alarming rate.

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, so those who step in as foster carers play a vital role in the healing process of children and families in crisis. Without these dedicated and talented adults, Australia faces

the prospect of a return to extremely expensive institutionalisation for children in crisis.

The impact on children's psychological health would be enormous and, as history tells us, could lead to individuals being burdened by lifelong interaction with the judicial, welfare and health systems.

So what can we do to recruit more skilled and committed foster carers? And how can we ensure that experienced foster carers are encouraged to continue to care for these most vulnerable children and young people?

Australia is not alone in facing this problem and the report, supported by The Jack Brockhoff Foundation and the Sir Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, examines what the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and the United States are doing to increase their foster carer capacity, given that they have all experienced a similar crisis. There are important lessons for Australia.

²Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009. Child Protection Australia 2007-08. p. ix.

Recruitment

The Australian Experience

“Usually the only time you hear about the foster care system is when something goes horribly wrong and it hits the front page. I’ve seen ads for foster carers in the papers, but I’m not sure that would convince me to do it. I only decided to become a carer after hearing about a friend’s experience” – Sue, Foster Carer, Australia

Right across Australia, the recruitment of foster carers is a growing problem.

Why? Women are working for longer hours and most households need two incomes. Carers are volunteers, reimbursements don’t meet the costs of caring for the child and the children needing care often have complex needs. Combine this with negative publicity and there is a societal fear of both the task of fostering and the risks, financially and legally.

New sources have been tapped resulting in recruitment taking a clear change of direction,

responding to interest from new groups of prospective foster carers, particularly:

- Mature single females
- Professional couples in paid work
- Same sex couples.

But these new sources of support are not enough. And word of mouth – by far the most effective means of attracting people to the role – can actively work against recruitment if existing foster carers are unhappy with the status quo, or planning to leave themselves.

The International Experience

United States of America

"You see ads for foster kids everywhere – on buses, billboards, even on TV – and it's all backed by the government. They really want to find these kids homes. I first went along to an information session for people interested in fostering after seeing some kids being interviewed on TV. It really brings it home when you can put a face to a story"

– Jason, Foster Carer, America

In the US, a very public approach to the recruitment of foster carers provides a stark contrast to the methods employed in Australia.

In 2005, a coalition of national organisations and foster care alumni committed to raising public awareness strengthening foster care. It has a powerful voice. It looks first and foremost at the needs of the child but crucially, advocates for all involved, providing a voice for the carers.

So who's listening to the Coalition?

Judges, court and child welfare agency staff, legislators, parents and advocates of youth in care are all influenced by the messages delivered.

There's an emphasis on:

- Permanent solutions for the child – perhaps planning to reunite families, placement with close relatives, independent living with support, or adoption. The children have a say, are involved in decision-making and feel included.
- Solutions for the child also involve ways to protect physical and mental health and to offer education, housing and work.

A great case study involves an agency using 'family finding', when every person with a positive influence on the child's life is contacted by a social worker and is invited to be a part of the process to locate a family. It's working. In its first three years, 57 per cent of children have found a permanent home within 18 months.

In many parts of the United States, state governments are responsible for major recruitment drives for foster carers, backed up by local foster care agencies.

Their approach:

- Targets specific audiences
- Showcases carers and young people in care
- Promotes support for carers
- Uses social media as a marketing tool.

Compared with Australia's approach to recruitment, the marketing is bold and often involves the child. Many agencies have a 'heart gallery' in their offices, displaying photos of children who are on a 'ready for adoption' list. Many kids don't mind the open advertising approach to finding families for them – they just want a home.

Another interesting approach involves the corporate sector. Agencies visit and promote foster care to staff and some businesses sponsor community service announcements to help find new carers.

The United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland

Reform is underway to develop a more professional system to recognise the major contribution of foster carers. The Fostering Network in the UK is one agency taking a lead role.

Recruitment is shared by local authorities, carer support groups and independent providers. There has been an interesting shift in the advertising methods used.

The internet – particularly Google Adwords – has reached the target market in recruitment campaigns, replacing expensive TV and radio time. As in the US, the stories of foster carers are used in creative and clever marketing campaigns. Recruitment enquiries come from newspapers (50 per cent), internet (30 per cent) and word of mouth (20 per cent).

As in Australia, negative media is the biggest hindrance to recruitment, so new, optimistic campaigns focus on the many benefits carers can expect.

Where next for Australia?

Foster care in Australia is mainly the responsibility of our State and Territory governments but a national approach to foster care and its issues has been agreed as a major priority under the Commonwealth's National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children³.

Appropriate pay for carers, resources and support are heavily linked to successful recruitment and retention of carers in the United States. If Australian carers feel valued in their role, and are better supported,

³National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020.

they will work through the challenges and complexities of the fostering system.

Berry Street is advocating for a professionalised system, improved carer support and payments, and ongoing training for carers. Separate papers on these issues are available from Berry Street.

The Commonwealth has a role because it could amend taxation and Industrial Relations laws to make it possible to recruit full-time, professionalised carers.

Training

The Australian Experience

“John and I have been carers for 12 years. Before we started, we had to do some pre-service training, and there have been a few other opportunities to do more, but it’s not mandatory. Then the agency was funded to do a therapeutic foster care program, and we were invited to undertake the training. Afterwards, I told the manager that I couldn’t believe how much I learned. I feel really sad that I hadn’t known any of this before – it would have made such a difference to the way I fostered. Every carer should have the opportunity to have this information” – Patricia, Foster Carer, Australia

Pre accreditation and on-going training for carers does occur across all Australian jurisdictions. However there is no national strategy for the development and delivery of training for foster carers.

In some jurisdictions, foster care training is supported by State and Territory Foster Care Associations. However, there is no national coordination of these efforts.

Carers do the mandatory pre-accreditation training before they start looking after children. Face-to-face training in groups is currently most common. However, carers are not required to participate in ongoing training. Crucially, there is no link between reimbursement and the level of training a carer has undertaken.

The International Experience

United States of America

“Every year we have to do 23 hours of training in order to maintain our accreditation as foster carers. And that’s on top of the pre-service training we did 15 years ago when we first began caring. The annual training isn’t an imposition at all – how else would we be able to keep up with developments in fostering practice and legislation and everything else? We can also access training on specific issues, say if we want to find out more about how to support a kid with drug and alcohol issues” – **Peter and Felicity, Foster Carers, USA**

State foster care associations are non-profit and funded by state governments. They support, train and mediate with the ultimate, simple and clear objective to nurture the child’s safety, well-being and stability.

One agency, the Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents, has 15 staff and takes 20,000 calls a year covering training, support, advocacy and outreach. This clearly offers a meaningful layer of support to carers.

All carers have pre-service training and undertake 24-hours of additional training each year. They are offered:

- Face-to-face training
- Online training
- Supervision.

Web-based training groups offer support and training at minimum cost to carers and agencies and if carers choose to undertake more difficult types of care, they take-on more hours of training.

The United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland

The foster care system recognises the carer as a ‘professional’ rather than simply a volunteer, a key partner in the team surrounding the child. To be deemed professional, foster carers must have

the same core competencies as those of other child care workers. To apply to foster, a person must have a recognised government-approved qualification⁴. This includes an on-site assessment of competence within the carer’s home.

⁴Training Support and Development Standards for Foster Care (CWDC, 2007).

Where next for Australia?

“I sometimes have the opportunity to meet other carers at the agency, but a lot of them work and can’t make it. I’d like to be able to chat to people on the web, or meet up with other carers in my area, so we can share experiences. It would also be good to be able to post questions to a site and have them answered by someone who’s been there, done that, or by someone from the agency. I would also like to access training on the web, because it is not always easy to attend sessions in the evenings or weekends because of the age of the children and our lack of family nearby to help out.” – Lou, Foster Carer, Australia

Australia requires a national framework for foster care training. This framework needs to take account of legislative differences between states and territories but should identify the core competencies required by all carers of children in home based care.

International experience tells us that well-resourced Foster Care Associations are critical to the development and implementation of consistent approaches to foster care training.

In Australia, State associations are not funded to provide the same level of independent advocacy, training, support and mediation to carers as they are overseas. An injection of funds would enhance our associations' capacity to train our foster carers and to support them in times of stress.

The profile of carers has changed significantly over the last 10 years with a higher number of carers working outside the home, making it difficult to meet face to face with other carers and to attend on-going training sessions.

At the same time, access to technology has evolved and many carers now expect training and support to be available online.

We must increase carers' access to electronic learning, networking and support in Australia.

There are no clear pathways for carers in Australia to do additional education and training. In the model for a professionalised system, developed by Berry Street, we have outlined a competency based training course that should be offered to all carers.

This includes:

- Mandatory pre-accreditation training;
- Mandatory early caring training;
- Modules that will meet competencies from the Certificate IV in Child, Youth and Family Intervention; and
- Electives on topics of particular interest to individual carers.

Support

The Australian Experience

"I'd love it if the two siblings in our care at the moment could make the move to permanent care with us – but the problem is that once we sign that order, we will lose all the support and resources we need to maintain their placement. In England, on the other hand, foster carers are actually rewarded for providing permanent care. They get a bonus, and additional payments because they have been prepared to take on permanent care of a sibling group." – Richard, Foster Carer, Australia

Foster carers in Australia are volunteers and receive a reimbursement or subsidy to partially cover the costs of caring for a child. It covers some of the general living expenses for the child but does not include any payment to carers for the skilled work they do – hardly an 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 territories .

Support to carers in Australia includes home visits, 24-hour phone back-up, and help to find services for the children in their care.

The International Experience

United States of America

In the US, there are three types of carers: general; therapeutic – who look after kids with complex medical and treatment needs; and professional.

When asked what they needed, carers said:

- Professional support for the children in their care
- Fair pay for the work they do
- Post-service training
- 24/7 support and independent mediation
- To be treated as an equal member of the fostering team
- Regular respite during complex placements.

Therapeutic and professional carers have access to clinical, educational, recreational and family workers. Professional carers are expected to take the extremely high risk-taking children who require out-of-home 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.

Support for the caring family includes 24-hour support, weekly visits, weekly psychologist consultations and professional development.

The United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland

“The agency I work for is funded so that they have their own clinician and education consultants, and can buy in extra resources for kids with special needs. It makes it very easy to get the care my children need, when they need it. I feel supported too. As well as providing training and an income, the agency provides me with full insurance – house, car and personal – plus legal advice if I should ever need it, and access to computers and a library of resources. They are our voice with government and the community too, along with the local representative of the national Foster Care Association.” – Andy, Foster Carer, UK

There is tremendous commitment amongst carers to focus on the best interests of the child and to offer the best level of care possible. Mentoring by their local support agencies helps them feel supported.

Specialist education and clinical support for children in care is available and there is no waiting for appointments with professionals. Agencies also provide tailored in-house resources for carers.

These include individually designed tools so children can develop life story books, independent living plans and ways to build resilience.

During difficult times, carers can call on independent support services offering mediation at no cost to the carer. Services like this one help the carers feel appreciated, important and valued. This leads to a feeling of optimism for a better future for the child in their care.

Where next for Australia?

“As a carer, I have limited access to the Foster Care Association of Victoria, but there is no one locally. There are just two staff members across the whole state so the help they can offer is limited to some minimal training and perhaps advice if there is a quality of care concern. As for my agency, what I really want is access to help during a crisis, and for my worker to have quality time with me and my child. That’s difficult because of their workload.” – Amanda, Foster Carer, Victoria

To adequately support Australian children in care, we need to embrace the attitude that carers are professionals and require significant support and supervision to last the distance.

Individualised support is a key. Carers need to have access to 24-hour support, ongoing training and payment that allows them to live comfortably.

For the children, tailored access to specific specialist education and clinical support is essential.

In the UK, we heard that a loss of optimism in the system leads to carers leaving the system – a salient reminder to Australian authorities.

Retention

The Australian Experience

“After 18 years, we just can’t do it any more. The last straw was the two young kids we looked after for a couple of years. The mum had disappeared, and the dad had moved away into town. We spent a lot of time driving them to assessments and care team meetings and access visits too, but the dad rarely showed up. The kids ended up not wanting to see him either. They were really becoming part of our family. But the dad opposed the idea of them going into permanent care with us, and the department refused to pursue it. It was heartbreaking. It was also quite expensive –in terms of both time and money. Our agency worker tried really hard, but would constantly come up against a brick wall. There’s not much support there for carers, and the resources they provide are inadequate to meet the children’s needs. No education for us, or counselling, or support to help keep the kids connected to their community. It was hard enough juggling work and the kids, but we also had to dip into our own pockets to get them the things they needed.” – **Lou, Foster Carer, Australia**

There is a serious decline in the number of Australians willing to become foster carers. Those who are persevering with this demanding role are ageing⁵.

Across Australia, we are struggling to keep our foster carers. In recent years, more have been leaving the system that we can recruit.

Retention is a big problem.

⁵Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, Child protection Australia 2012 – 2013 s6.3

Lack of investment by government and 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
- Children having to be moved between many different foster families
- Children and carer dissatisfaction with the system
- Carer burnout.

This dire situation coincides with our greater understanding of the impact of trauma and attachment issues on children.

Stability and consistency of care arrangements for children is absolutely essential, for their recovery.

The International Experience

United States of America

State foster care associations in the US recruit, support, train and mediate. As mentioned earlier, Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents is a non-profit organisation and is funded by both state and federal governments. It is committed to strengthening foster and adoptive families and relative caregivers.

Carer feedback in the US indicates that having access to an independent association keeps them going when the going gets tough.

They appreciate:

- Access to staff who return their calls
- Staff helping coordinate the child's care including medical assessments
- Respect for the role and expertise of carers
- Honest feedback
- Having someone who listens when they are at the end of their tether without fear of 'punishment'.

Retention depends on:

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

The United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland

“I had a choice to either work inside or outside the home, and I chose to stay home and pursue something I was passionate about, and be able to make a reasonable living as well. I’m not doing this for the money, but the money does allow me to continue to do something I love and I consider is very important. That said, the assessment process has to be right, so you attract the right kind of people.” – **Stephanie, Foster Carer, UK**

As mentioned in the Training section, the foster care system recognises the carer as a “professional”. As new standards are introduced in the UK and Ireland (and in Australia), more is expected of carers in a professional sense and more support is provided.

Carers are expected to provide reports to agencies and local authorities. They are offering daily accounts of the children’s activities, attending meetings on a more regular basis, adopting complex theories relating to children requiring care and dealing with the police and other statutory services.

Prior to recent efforts in the UK, Republic of Ireland and Ireland to improve carer support, carers did not have 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 the best outcomes⁶.

In a nutshell, to stay involved, they say they need:

- Adequate payment to cover mortgage/rent payments and to work from home, focusing on fostering and caring for the child’s needs
- Support and respect from agency staff & other professionals
- Ongoing training.

⁶The Cost Of Foster Care – Investing In Our Children’s Future. Tapsfield, R; Collier, F., 2005

Where next for Australia?

“The system is just too difficult to deal with. We put up our hand to do short-term and long-term care and after a couple of placements, a 2-year old boy with lots of attachment issues was placed with us. The initial plan was for him to return home to his family, and there was lots of work done preparing the mum and dad, but after a while they started skipping meetings and access visits. The father had drug and alcohol issues and it was suspected that the mother was on drugs too. She and the boy ended up in a mother and baby unit because she couldn’t cope and the decision was made for the boy to come back to us. However, when it went to court, the magistrate said that the kid had to go home with his parents.” – Alex, Foster Carer, Australia

To help Australian foster carers remain in the system, we need action in a number of areas. When carers are asked to identify areas of need, they currently say:

- **Provision of “wrap around” services** for the child in care. Carers are frustrated when they see the child waiting for services. This frustration at times leads to a sense of hopelessness for both the child and the carers. It leads to burnout for the carer and a sense of worthlessness for the child.
- **Independent support, mediation and advocacy.** This is an important feature of a good fostering system. Carers feel valued and have a sense of hope for the future, which assists in the retention of precious carers.
- **Improved financial assistance** will provide an appropriate incentive for individuals to “choose” in-home or outside-home financial earnings, and will actually cover costs for general care and for the carer’s skill.
- **Training and professional development** prepares carers for the challenging role of carers and up-skills them for the challenges of specific children.
- **Respite for carers,** to support those caring for children with complex behaviours, is essential in preventing the burnout of carers.
- **Respect and the authority to care for children** have been highlighted as major concerns for carers. Enhanced delegation and authority would allow carers to make day-to-day decisions for the child.



To push for action in all these areas will require a coordinated and concerted effort from all stakeholders, led by foster carers and their foster care associations.

Conclusion

“Developing a truly professional foster care system in Australia will create better outcomes for children in care”

– Anita Pell, Monograph Author

The foster care crisis highlighted in this monograph is not isolated to Australia. Similar issues within the foster care sector are shared across the globe. Change is afoot in the US, UK, Ireland and elsewhere, and we can learn from those who are further down the road.

The bottom line for Berry Street is to achieve better outcomes for children and young people in care.

The keys to success include ensuring that carers receive:

- Formal, nationally accredited professional training to help them deal with the increasing complexities of care.
- Respect and more power to make timely day-to-day decisions for the children in their care.
- Suitable support and resources for the child in their care and their own family.
- Appropriate independent support, advice and mediation during allegations of abuse or times of conflict.
- Formal support structures that afford increased accountability for their role as carers, resulting in an increase in quality of care.
- A fair payment for the work they do, separate to the reimbursement of the child’s living expenses.







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