

## Foster Care Review - NSW 2024

### Submission to Enquiry

The NSW foster care system plays a critical role in providing care for children who cannot live with their biological families for a diverse range of reasons.

In providing quality care foster parents often face significant challenges:

- Insufficient financial support - leading to personal expense
- Lack of access to accredited training and professional 24/7 support
- Angst in navigating the constant churning of agency/department staff
- Burnout due to the unavailability of quality respite care.

Investing in increased resourcing and support for NSW foster parents is crucial for enhancing the quality of care provided to NSW foster children, improving foster parent retention and ultimately achieving better outcomes for children in the foster care system.

It is extremely stressful for foster families to work with NGO and Departmental staff who are not always sufficiently trained in the relevant aspects of the disability impacting the children in care that they are case managing. Staff often lack empathy, the relevant life skills and experience and the necessary soft skills to allow connection with relevant specialised services and agencies. Staff churn through the organisations at an incredibly high rate. Staff handovers are usually rushed, provide insufficient historical detail and can be detrimental to the child and the foster family. Case loads seem to vary from NGO to NGO.

The NSW OOHC system has inadequate structure in relation to the management placements and the psychological, educational and health needs of the children. Furthermore, the system is not structured correctly in relation to foster carer/children support, funding and integration with the political, legal and health systems. Addressing these issues through increased resourcing would lead to more stable placements, better child development outcomes, and reduced long-term social costs.

There is a strong and disproportionate skew to supporting the biological parents.

#### ***Some issues faced by foster parents are frequently not assisted:***

- Sourcing specialists to obtain professional advice – there is a preference by some Specialists not to treat foster children due to a perceived financial risk. A child in need can spend years on a waiting list to see a Specialist. It takes a very committed carer to overcome this issue.
- Technology for Telehealth meetings, mobile phone for contact with agency and school etc. is required must be provided by the carer at their own expense.
- Wear and tear on my vehicle plus fuel for driving to school, Library, Gymbaroo, The Nest, swimming lessons, rock climbing sport class, dentist visits, doctors' appointments, OT appointments, behavioural optometrist, NGO meetings and training held in the NGO office and all other appointments related to routine assessment for the mental health and development of the child.

#### ***Items not financially supported by the system.***

Cost of long-term meds:

No financial support provided for Asthma - Ventolin, Ritalin, Scripts \$45 Aemyst monthly, Asthma preventer monthly, \$50 Melatonin per script as needed. Vitamins, bowel medications, worm treatments. Head lice, gastro and conjunctivitis treatments, as required, during school breakouts.

School expenses Book & Technology fees

Excursions/Incursion x 2 per annum

Sports Carnival Inc bus fees

School uniforms (Mandatory) - Winter Summer and sport

School shoes – three pair per year including sport shoes

School bag, lunch boxes, drink bottles, library bag, special day outfits and donations.

Attending and gifts for school friends and his family birthday parties/Mother's Day/ Xmas etc.

Sensitive washing liquid & conditioner

Sensitive bath wash & shampoo

Foods for special Diet – e.g. Soft diet required for Obstructive tonsillitis.

All Clothing: underwear, shoes & socks, sportswear for swimming, athletics etc, slippers, dressing gown, pyjamas, winter jackets and beanies, good clothes and street/play clothes.

Toiletries. Including sun block, dental and hair care.

Two toothbrushes- electric & sensory. Sensitive toothpaste.

Haircuts \$28 every 3 weeks

OT equipment such as peanut ball, soccer ball, grip ball set, balance board, sensory toys and games

Mandatory Car seats/installation - as per legal requirements. Car head rest, sunshade for window.

Craft, games and drawing accessories for drawing and craft activities.

Entertainment movies, parks, Nintendo and outdoor toys.

Laptop connection, security and virus protection and upkeep for homework - ABC READING EXPRESS

Caregivers are often required to provide details to NGO staff for their reporting purposes including court reports, PBP etc. as original reports are often lost/NGO filing system is not fit for purpose. The lost data often contains critical dates, diagnoses, practitioner details, follow up dates etc. Churning of social workers with insufficient historical details communicated as it has been lost causes gaps in case management. This will lead to the carer filling in the gaps in their time, at their expense, at times travelling to the NGO office for meetings.

Holidays.... critical for the child and carers mental health. There is no support for the child's percentage of costs.

Foster parents are invisible in the court system and the NGO can say anything in their report. Unless I use a solicitor, at my own expense, I will never know what is in the report, never have a chance to defend myself if required or to represent the child. In my case, a solicitor did tell me that the NGO reported that I was "over the top". This referred to the fact that I am very particular with my home, personal cleanliness and the cleanliness and protection for the children in my care. I have provided respite for and reported children who have had head lice for in excess of 17 months, were severely infested with intestinal worms, have been sent to me with medication that was not prescribed for them, had holes the size of a 50 cent piece in school shoes, had black mouldy sandwiches in the bottom of their school bag, arrived with a bag full of filthy clothes that hadn't been unpacked or washed from their last respite at another location. I reported all of these incidents and I do advocate for children whose placement is not being sufficiently monitored

My home address was given to an extremely hostile birth parent in a report that was passed on without being proofread. The NGO did pay for some security measures, but it also cost me in excess of \$5,000 to put security on my home to protect us. We still live with the fear of this aggressive parent arriving at my home.

It is essential that improved Child Outcomes are achieved to provide:

- Enhanced emotional and psychological support leading to better mental health.
- Access to educational resources to improve academic performance.
- Stable placements which reduce trauma and foster a sense of security for children and families.

Foster Parent Retention

- Adequate financial support reduces the financial burden on foster families.
- Ongoing training equips foster parents with skills to manage challenging behaviours.
- Access to respite care prevents burnout and supports foster parent well-being.
- Accredited training may lead to employment opportunities when children in care are older

Cost Savings

- Reducing placement disruptions lowers administrative and operational costs.
- Improved child outcomes decrease long-term expenditures on healthcare, social services, and the legal system.

## Proposed Resources

### Financial Support

- Increase the foster care allowance to cover the full cost of caring for a child.
- Increase and review eligibility for additional allowances for children with special needs or those in higher-cost regions.
- Ensure consistency across all NGOs and the department.

### Training and Support Services

- Provide mandatory, accredited training for foster parents and NGO staff based on a mandatory skills audit for trauma-informed care and behavioural management.
- Ensure access to 24/7 helplines and support networks.
- Ensure consistency across all NGOs and the department.

### Educational and Psychological Services

- Offer tutoring services and educational support for foster children.
- Provide access to counselling and psychological services for both children and foster parents.
- Ensure consistency across all NGOs and the department.

### Respite Care

- Develop a structured respite care program to give foster parents regular breaks.
- Ensure consistency across all NGOs and the department.

### Cost Analysis

The proposed increase in resourcing will require an upfront investment and needs to address the increased cost of living in NSW.

- Increased Foster Care Allowance
- Training and Support Services
- Educational and Psychological Services
- Respite Care

Last week the NGO my placement is through, introduced a new finance system, there was no notification to carers.

This mattered because the payment advice came from a different email address, the advice was in a completely different format and had a rather odd message indicating that the payment arrival will depend on bank processing times. We are all on the watch for scammers so change needs to be advised.

The payment advice email was received on Thursday evening of 11th July, the due date. However, my payment didn't come in and still had not been received on the following Monday.

I contacted an NGO finance officer, no reply; so, I contacted a different NGO finance officer, no response; so, I contacted my Social Worker. You need to understand that if they are at fault or are not interested, they simply do not reply.

Fortunately, my SW did follow up and then I did receive an email from the first NGO Finance Officer who told me I would need to wait to the next payment run even though it was their mistake. She, of course, then advised that a new financial system had been implemented last week!!! They had used old data and hence my account details were not updated and were incorrect. My payment had bounced back but they hadn't contacted me, and it took three emails to get any response.

This is mid school holidays, and we are out and about - Disney on Ice, trampolining, play dates with friends etc. I am 70 so I try to make the holidays as much fun as I can.

You need to be able to afford to be a foster carer because no one really cares what it costs you. I am on a pension but luckily can afford to weather their storms. We run a tight ship.

There is no information or support provided to assist with Carers Allowance, NSW Companion Card, Medicare Safety net registration/changes – their soft skills are woefully inadequate, and the care factor is zilch. You truly are on your own.

I have now received the belated payment.