

**THE DEPARTMENT FOR CHILD PROTECTION'S
FOSTER CARE PARTNERSHIP**

BACKGROUND PAPER



Department for Child Protection
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<p style="text-align: center;">THE DEPARTMENT FOR CHILD PROTECTION'S FOSTER CARE PARTNERSHIP Background Paper</p>
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1.0 Introduction

Western Australia's volunteer foster care model is the framework within which the Department for Child Protection (DCP) accommodates most of the children within the Chief Executive Officer's (CEO) care. Recruitment and retention of family foster carers however has become an increasing challenge locally, nationally and globally.

The review of the Department for Community Development (2007) identified barriers to the recruitment and retention of foster carers including that "*the level of support provided by the Department to general and relative foster carers.... has been identified during consultations as inadequate*", and that "*field workers are often unable to act as a reliable support for general and relative foster carers*".

The review recommended that support for general and relative foster carers be recognised as a specific function provided by the Department; that general and relative foster carers be regarded as valuable members of the care and protection team; and that the Department actively seek and consider the input of general and relative foster carers into decision-making regarding children in their care.

This background paper details the Department's response to these recommendations. The *Foster Care Partnership* sets out the Department's new model of foster care team participation and support, articulating clear guidelines for departmental officers, districts and branches, and introducing a range of products and services that will enhance the Department's transition towards the highest standards for foster carer partnership.

2.0 Method

In partnership with the Western Australian Foster Care Association (FCA) the Department undertook an extensive review of existing policies, guidelines and practices, and obtained and analysed international and national best practice literature.

Foster carers, Senior Officer Care Services (SOCS), District Directors, departmental staff, the Foster Care Association (FCA), and community sector agencies were represented on a project steering committee and/or working group that extensively consulted key stakeholders. Successful practices were noted and less successful strategies were critiqued. Considerable debate refined local ideas for improved foster care team development and support, and the products of these deliberations were reviewed in light of the Western Australian policy context.

Additionally, literature describing best practice interstate and overseas was collected and analysed for specific models, standards and tools that could further inform local change.

A 'Foster Care Team Participation and Support Working Group Report' (2009) detailed the issues, ideas and conclusions of the consultative and analytical tasks undertaken that became the basis of this background paper and attached policy statement (Appendix 1).

3.0 Key Learning

The review identified respect, teamwork and support, and a range of specific tools and strategies as the key to development of an enhanced foster care partnership.

3.1 Respect

Respect of the foster care family's skills, experience and willingness to fulfil the foster parent and sibling role is universally identified as the essential ingredient to successful foster care partnerships. Systemic respect for carers involves recognition of the centrality of the carer's role within the foster care partnership, willingness to establish open communications and honest relationships, and a freedom to share information that protects and nurtures the foster family and child.

Key learning included:

- Centrality of the foster family: The foster family must be recognised as central to the foster care partnership with recognition of the vital team role played by adults and children in supporting the placement and protecting and nurturing the foster child.
- Provision of information: Carers must be provided with full information about the foster child and their family to enable the carer to protect and nurture the foster child, their own children, other children in their care and themselves.
- Contact visits: Contact visits between the child and their biological family must be managed in such a manner as to support the foster placement and the fostering partnership.

3.2 Teamwork and Support

Implementation of a system of teamwork and support for the foster placement (that is both foster family and foster child) is the second essential ingredient of successful foster care partnerships. All supports, including supports to participate as a team member, must be readily available and targeted to meet needs identified by the foster family and child, must be consistent in delivery and must be established within organisational structure and process. Ideally, many supports will be delivered by people removed from case management responsibility.

Key learning included:

- Critical role of the child protection care team: The child protection care team must fulfil the critical role of providing a smorgasbord of child and foster family support strategies that enhance the placement and the foster care partnership.
- Assessment, planning and review: Carers must be supported to formally participate as a team member in assessment, planning and review of the child, and to participate in other child centred decision making that occurs outside of the Department's formal planning and review processes.
- Foster care placement: Carers must be supported to raise children in their care in a stable and secure environment where their social, emotional, psychological and developmental needs are met.

- Diversity and equity: Carers must be provided with the support and resources they require to ensure they can meet the needs of the child in their care with regard to gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality.

3.3 Strategies and Tools

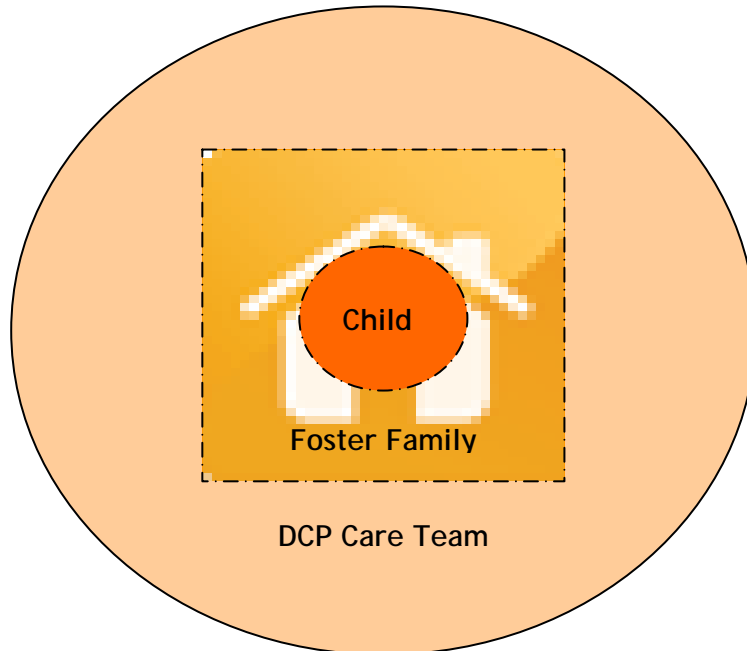
A range of strategies and tools were identified as helpful to facilitating enhanced foster care partnerships. These included the development of minimum standards (e.g.: United Kingdom) and similar policy initiatives, and implementation of specific tools such as formal agreements.

Key learning included:

- Departmental Standards: Departmental policies, practice guidelines and support services as they relate to children in care and foster families, at a district and organisational level, must support the foster care partnership and ensure representation and input from carers.
- Departmental Tools & Strategies: Partnership enhancing strategies and tools must be developed and made available to support the foster care partnership (see Section 6 below).

4.0 Model

The new Western Australian foster care team and support model, the *Foster Care Partnership*, applicable to how the Department works with general and relative carers, is illustrated below.



Three elements make up the foster care partnership:

- A focus on the child
- The foster family
- The DCP care team

4.1 The child focus

The Department provides, supports and/or funds a range of out-of-home care options for children in the care of the CEO. The allocation of resources and the selection of placement option are directly related to the assessment of the child's protection, care and development needs.

Where the assessment results in placement within the Department's volunteer foster care service it is acknowledged that the child becomes the focal point of the service provided. The foster family that provides daily nurture and the DCP care team that support and sustain the placement do so with a focus on the needs of the child.

4.2 The foster family

The foster family is the team of people living, caring and nurturing the foster child (and all other child members of the family) every day and every week the child is within the placement. This "family team" consists of the primary carer(s), biological children and significant extended family members who provide quality care, support and supervision for the child throughout each day. The foster family addresses all aspects of the life of the child for whom they provide care including:

- Providing a stable, safe, and nurturing environment that addresses all aspects of healthy development for children and young people, including their physical, social, emotional, cognitive, cultural and spiritual needs.
- Promoting and supporting the relationship of children and young people with their family and their connectedness with their social networks and community.
- Facilitating additional supports and opportunities identified in partnership with the DCP care team.
- Developing their skills as carers through learning and development.

The Department recognises that when it places a child in foster care the foster family (working together as a team) is the child's provider of daily nurture and the Department's central agent for child protection and development.

4.3 The DCP care team

Surrounding, encompassing and supporting the child and the family team is the DCP care team. The DCP care team usually consists of the case worker, team leader, SOCS and other DCP staff. In larger locations these staff are organised into 'children in care placement' and/or 'carer support' teams while in smaller localities other team models may be used. The DCP care team is to work in partnership with the family team to:

- Ensure the placement is facilitating the child's safety, well-being and stability (consistent with the principles of Signs of Safety and the development and review of case plans and care plans).
- Ensure the child and biological family is included in planning and decision making where ever possible.
- Support the child's relationship with their family and community.
- Identify specific needs and provide supports and solutions.

Honest open communication must be the hallmark of interactions between the DCP care team and the foster family. Issues of privacy and confidentiality are addressed within this framework. Similarly, the host of other roles undertaken by the DCP care team members such as balancing biological family interests, legal requirements, other agency requests, extended family issues, reunification discussions and decisions, and other such significant tasks are best undertaken in the context of a strong honest foster care partnership with the foster family.

4.4 Implications for practice

Carers allocated the responsibility of caring for children in the care of the CEO are at the heart of the Department's volunteer foster care service. The Department is committed to supporting and sustaining foster placements and therefore is committed to adoption of a teamwork approach to foster care. This core relationship with foster carers does not detract from the Department's responsibility to meet the best interests of the child by maintaining their relationships with the birth family, extended family and community, nor does it diminish efforts to achieve (where possible) reunification.

Implementation of the new fostering partnership requires Department staff to ensure that practice guidelines are met.

5.0 Practice Guidelines

5.1 Assessment, Planning and Review

Purpose: Carers are supported to formally participate as a team member in assessment, planning and review of the child, and to participate in other child centred decision making that occurs outside of the Department's formal planning and review processes.

- The carer is to be supported to be present and participate in the placement assessment, planning and review processes. Carers are to be given at least two weeks notice prior to formal planning or decision making forums (care plan or care plan review) with courteous consideration in setting the time.
- The carer is to be afforded the opportunity to provide a 'Carer Report' to planning and review meetings. The reports of the other team members are to be provided to the carer at least three days in advance. The final care plan is to be provided to the foster carer and the child.
- Care plan reviews will be undertaken at the request of the foster carer if there are significant problems they are experiencing or positive outcomes being achieved that affect the plan.
- Key elements of care plans changed during formal review processes are discussed with the carer if he or she has not been present within one week. Carers are to be informed of any minor changes to a care plan within a similar timeframe.
- When there is a difference of opinion between the carer and the case worker (or other departmental staff) regarding the behavioural

management of a child, the SOCS is to mediate the issue and ensure any necessary professional specialist input is provided.

- The annual carer review is best undertaken as a joint process with the SOCS using the Signs of Safety three column tool (what is working well, what are we worried about, what are we going to do). Carers are also to have the option of developing an individual learning plan at this time.

5.2. Provision of Information

Purpose: Carers are provided with full information about the foster child and their family to enable the carer to protect the foster child, their own children, other children in their care and themselves.

- The initial placement plan and Child Information Form (CIF) is to be given to carers with the District Director overseeing this process at the time of the initial placement discussion.
- At the time of placement, the carer is to be provided with as full a description as possible of the health needs of the child and clear procedures governing consent for the child to receive medical treatment. If full details of the health needs are not available at the time of the placement, a high priority is given to ensuring that the information is obtained and provided to the foster carer as soon as possible after the placement is made. The carer is then provided with a copy of DCP's written health record for each child placed in their care; this is updated during the placement and moves with the child.
- The carer is to be provided with a copy of DCP's written education plan for each child placed in their care; this is updated during the placement and moves with the child.
- Any additional information in relation to the child or the biological family that will potentially impact on the placement and/or assist in the care of the child is to be provided to the carer.

5.3. Foster Care Placement and Support

Purpose: Carers are supported to raise children in their care in a stable and secure environment where their social, emotional, psychological and developmental needs are met.

- Case workers and other departmental staff are to work with the foster family as a family unit. This includes acknowledging and interacting with other children in the home as appropriate and ensuring gifts (including cards) provided by the Department are discussed prior with foster carers to ensure children are not treated differently.
- A home visit is to be undertaken within one week of a placement with the case worker having familiarised themselves with the case file before undertaking the visit.
- When there is a change in case worker, the new case worker is to be introduced to the carer within one week.

- Case workers are to have at least monthly contact with each carer, either face to face or by phone.
- District Directors are to provide a range of opportunities for carers to be introduced to the Department's work and processes, be engaged with the staff and management of districts, provide input to the district, and access formalised peer support. These opportunities are to be outlined in the district's annual operational plan.
- The Department will coordinate access to other support and mentoring activities for foster families (including both biological children and children in care), and opportunities for formalised peer support in which more experienced carers are linked with less experienced carers.
- Carers are to be provided with opportunities to debrief when required (ideally with a SOCS, departmental psychologist or by referral to external agency).
- Each carer is to be provided with the departmental out-of-home care handbook that is for carers and staff.
- Carers are to be provided with a *Life Story* book to assist the child in their care to keep information about themselves.

5.4. Contact Visits

Purpose: Contact visits between the child and their birth family will be managed in such a manner as to support the foster placement and the fostering partnership.

- Case workers are to negotiate with the foster carer any variations in contact visit arrangements as set out in the care plan at least 24 hours in advance.
- The SOCS is to support the carer in dealing with any difficult contact issues that arise, including undertaking a formal process with regard to any serious concerns (e.g.: neglect or abuse) raised by the carer in relation to biological family members.
- The Department appreciates the involvement of carers in contact visits. When a carer requests that they undertake the contact visit/s, a formal assessment of the carer's capacity to do this is to be undertaken. Based on the outcomes of the assessment support is to be provided to the carer to undertake this role.

5.5. Diversity and Equality

Purpose: Carers are provided with the support and resources they require to ensure they can meet the needs of the child in their care with regard to gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality.

- Non-Indigenous carers are to be provided with the support, information and resources required to meet the cultural needs of an Indigenous child in their care, including linking the carer with a Senior Officer Aboriginal Services (SOAS).

- Carers are to be provided with information on the services provided by the Telephone Information Service and are linked with CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) community groups and agencies when they have a child in their care from a CALD background.

5.6. Departmental Policies and Services

Purpose: Development of departmental policies and services for children in care and foster families, at a district and organisational level, will involve input from carers and/or the Foster Care Association (FCA).

- Each district is to provide opportunities for carer input into the district's systems and processes for children in care and carer support.
- Representative carers are to be invited to attend each district's conference and/or other key planning forums when addressing children in care issues.
- FCA to meet regularly with the Director General and relevant Executive Directors to enhance strategic implementation of foster care related policies and services.

6.0 Tools

The review identified four documents that will be adapted and introduced to enhance the DCP foster care partnership: a foster care agreement; an out-of-home care handbook; a life story book; and a communication booklet for carers and biological parents.

6.1 Foster Care Agreement

Agencies in the United Kingdom, the United States and Queensland use an 'agreement' to establish a formal relationship between themselves and individual foster care families. The use of a formal signed agreement between carers and DCP would facilitate more effective team collaboration by increasing the level of accountability, transparency and openness between carers and DCP staff.

6.2 Out of Home Care Handbook

The Victorian Government in liaison with the Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) have a resource entitled, '*The Out of Home Based Care Handbook*' to improve collaboration between carers and staff, to increase the recognition of the vital role played by carers, and to ensure more effective communication of the purpose and nature of the home based care program. Review of the existing Department handbook for foster carers (Foster Care Handbook, for Foster Families) will be undertaken to incorporate benefits identified within the Victorian handbook.

6.3 Life Story Book

The NSW Department for Community Services has developed a resource entitled, '*My Life Story Book*' that is a record of a child or young person's life in words, pictures, photos and documents. The book allows for a chronological account of the child or young person's history and begins when the child enters out of home

care and is kept up during their time in care. The Department in partnership with FCA will liaise with the NSW Department to replicate this resource in Western Australia.

6.4 Communication Booklet

Consultations identified the need for a tool for carers that would assist in the development of the relationship between the carers and the foster child's biological parent(s). The Department will create a tool to enhance communication through structuring dialogue on issues such as key child related developments and events, as well as important biological parent/family related developments and events. Carers and biological parents will learn from each other information such as the likes and dislikes of the child and preferences or solutions regarding child rearing, and the document will provide a record for the child about their parents involvement during this period of their life.

6.5 District Foster Carer Induction Package

The foster carer induction package developed by the Joondalup district is a resource kit designed to provide assistance to new carers in negotiating the complexities of the Department for Child Protection and explaining the ways of working at the district. The kit is part of a number of initiatives designed to support and develop positive working relationships with carers and helps and supports carers in all aspects of being a foster carer for the district and therefore for the Department. The Department will create a generic induction package template from the Joondalup package that will ensure carers in all districts have a resource that can be used for:

- The induction of general and relative carers
- The provision of information to all approved carers about particular topics and district specific information
- The provision of information to prospective carers and as part of the "Continuum of Care" for children and young people in out-of-home care.

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