

Messages from Foster Carers

May 2008

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I became a Foster Carer because

“It is something I had wanted to do for a long time – my parents did respite care through another organisation when I was younger and I always enjoyed having extra little people around. I now work in a school and see many children in need of care and attention. Being a foster carer is my way of helping make someone’s life a little better.”

From the Director

“...Because we care.”

The above quote is from one of Tasmania’s foster carers.

I would like to acknowledge the amount of care and devotion displayed by our fine team of foster carers, to congratulate them on the quality of care they provide, and also to thank them for taking part in the recent survey of Tasmanian foster carers and forums held around the State.

Our foster carers perform invaluable roles within the Tasmanian community. As the carers for members of our State’s emerging generation, many of whom have had difficult early years, their service is at once demanding, generous and vital.

This is why Children and Family Services (CAFS) is committed to improving the support it provides this State’s foster carers. In 2007 we realised that, to achieve this, we needed a better knowledge of the day-to-day issues facing foster carers in every region of our State. This resulted in the first extensive, state-wide survey of Tasmanian foster carers conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services. The survey, follow up phone survey, and a series of focus groups are among the first in a series of activities we will use to work with our foster carers to learn more about their needs.

While the compassion that foster carers offer through their safe and supportive home care for children may be prevalent in every part of Tasmania, CAFS respects the fact that each carer faces unique and particular hurdles to overcome. Therefore, staying in touch with our foster carers is essential to enhancing the Department’s understanding of these issues. Furthermore, our foster carers are a prerequisite for encouraging community participation, to bring more people on board as foster carers so we can create the best possible system Tasmania can offer.

For us to improve the care system, all stakeholders must work together in an atmosphere of trust, honesty and respect. Our recent surveys, along with the state-wide forums, encouraged a “say it like it is” response. Many foster carers have taken us up on that challenge. Many have also come up with some excellent ideas to improve the ways in which we work together. The effort foster carers have taken to respond has been greatly appreciated.

Thank you all, and I look forward to continuing to work with you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Byrne', with a decorative flourish at the end.

Mark Byrne
Director
Children and Family Services

Introduction: The Messages we are Receiving

CAFS is committed to staying in touch with foster carers and other key stakeholders to ensure that the future directions in Tasmania's Out of Home Care system are driven by what will really help. We want to move forward in a co-operative way to ensure the best interests of all children in care are being met (the terms "child" and "children" used in this document include young people).

**"Being available to follow up on queries – Staying in touch
– making the carer feel like they are part of a team."**

Voluntary carers occupy a unique position in the child protection system. They provide care within tight guidelines and standards that aim to protect the child or young person as well as the carer, they are supported by a non-government organisation (the Foster Care Association of Tasmania, or FCAT) and they have regular contact with the child protection program through their involvement in care planning and decision making. However, they are not paid and are not part of a professional body. We want to acknowledge their generosity in volunteering to care for the vulnerable in our midst.

This document brings together the key messages the Department is hearing from foster carers. It contains both summaries of the general issues foster carers are conveying to the Department and specific ideas suggested by foster carers for improvement. It was prepared from information gained in the postal survey of foster carers conducted in December 2007, the telephone survey on financial matters done in March 2008, feedback from carers at forums around the state, and informal input from carers.

We appreciate carers' honesty in speaking up and we want our foster carers to know that we are hearing them. Foster carers forums were held around the state. The forums discussed the 'consultation version' of this report and provided the opportunity for carers to provide feedback about the messages in the report and to have additional input before the final version was prepared.

The messages we are hearing will inform departmental staff of the issues carers are facing, help to direct departmental policy and procedures, empower foster carers to improve the system, encourage other community members to take up foster caring, and ensure that we are all working together to help those children in our care who are relying on us to get it right.

"To see changes in the child that you are nurturing."

In Tasmania there are many types of carers supporting children and young people besides foster carers. They include formal kinship carers; grandparents and other relatives who informally support children; foster carers associated with non government organisations; and departmental rostered carers. The views and issues affecting these carers are equally important. The decision to begin our research with a survey of the foster carers associated with CAFS was simply a practical one about taking the first step.

This report provides foster carers and others with a stake in child protection with an overview of the issues for carers and the direction CAFS is taking in meeting carers' needs. It is written against a backdrop of child protection reform in which the role of carers is recognised as part of the team that supports Tasmania's at risk children and families.

Recruitment and Retention

Tasmanian foster carers contribute to our community through the act of welcoming and caring for the hundreds of children and young people who cannot live with their immediate family. Foster carers are singles, couples and families, all with the same aim - to ensure that children and young people who need out of home care are looked after in the best possible way to promote their health, wellbeing and life's progress. Care may be provided in emergencies, for a short term, for the long term, or as respite. The responses to the survey confirm that caring can be immensely rewarding as well as challenging.

Recruiting and supporting foster carers is a vital role for CAFS. The information we have received from carers suggests that at least 20 per cent of existing carers will cease being foster carers within two years. The increase in need for out of home care placement for children and young people is also well documented. There is therefore a need to increase the effort to recruit and train additional foster carers across all areas of the State.

The choice to become a foster carer is an intensely personal one, generally made in consultation with close and extended family members. The survey and consultation responses give an insight into what triggers people to make that decision.

I became foster carer because

“I grew up across the road from a group home and when I was older I decided I wanted to give children, whose parents weren't coping, a chance of being in a loving home until they could return to their biological family.”

Issues and concerns from foster carers on recruitment and retention

A theme running through the messages we have been receiving is the need to “tell it like it is” to prospective foster carers. Foster carers have highlighted the need for honesty in the recruitment and training process, and some foster carers have raised concern that the full picture of foster caring was not given to them during their recruitment and training.

The overwhelming majority of foster carers who took part in the recent survey made the decision to become a foster carer because of their concern for children and their belief in their personal ability to make a difference. A smaller number responded to advertisements or a direct request (often from a friend or associate of their wider family) to care for a specific child. Forum participants, too, highlighted their personal desire to make a positive difference for children.

Issues that foster carers have identified within the recruitment process include a lack of honesty and openness as to the “true” experience of foster caring as well as the length of time it takes to get through the process to become a foster carer.

There were also concerns that some carers are being overlooked for placements while other carers are taking on multiple children.

Carers highlighted that better support to them from staff would enhance retention, with some indicating that they would continue, rather than cease being a carer, if support improved.

*I became a foster carer because of
“A need to do something I care about – ensuring a positive
future for our children and future generation;
and I am pretty good at it.”*

Ideas from foster carers about recruitment and retention

- Improve the level of honesty about foster care by having greater foster care involvement in selection and training.
- Develop mentoring and networks of support for carers.
- Guidance and information should be given to families who want to foster care, to help them understand the impact caring may have on other family members.
- The Department requires a more systematic and transparent approach when placing children with carers.
- The Department needs to more strongly recognise and value the work that carers perform. Suggestions for recognition included ideas like giving small tokens of recognition such as movie tickets, a small bonus or Christmas cards.
- The efforts of foster carers should also be formally recognised during public occasions such as Volunteer Week.
- Establish an identity (ID) card system for foster carers, to help promote a “team like” feeling amongst carers and enable them to be readily identified within the community when needed. This may also enable carers to receive discounts at certain retail outlets, community events, play gyms, etc.
- Timely and accessible respite needs to be available for all foster carers.
- Ensure exit interviews occur with foster carers when a child has left their care, and when they cease to be a foster carer.

“Tell everything as it is: let people know the down sides.”

What we are doing on recruitment and retention

- CAFS has rethought its recruitment processes and planning is well underway for a coordinated state-wide recruitment campaign. In addition, during the next twelve months we will be canvassing the media across the State with a view to raising public awareness about foster care.
- The Department has identified gaps in the present carer pool and will target carer recruitment to meet the demand for particular placement types.
- The Department is redesigning a variety of recruitment material to more successfully promote carer recruitment throughout the State.
- The Department will further engage with community organisations to lead the way for such organisations to play a greater role in providing and managing care options in the future.
- CAFS is continually reviewing its training program for carers. If you have more ideas for improving our training please let us know.
- CAFS has recognised that there is a need for more specialised on-going training programs for foster carers and these will be put into place as we develop our therapeutic foster care program.

Communication and Support

Providing support in the area of foster caring is a key part of the role played by CAFS staff and the recent consultations present a concerning picture about meeting this role. CAFS is undertaking key reforms at present, and it is important that foster carers are listened to and their opinions taken into consideration throughout the Out of Home Care reform process.

“It is hard to get support when you need a break – even when you let the right person know they seem to forget about it.”

Training and ongoing education is one way that the Department can help support carers. “Shared Stories, Shared Lives” is used as part of the foster care training for new or prospective foster carers and includes eight modules which cover all aspects of foster caring from “how and why children come into care” and “the foster carer’s role” to “grief and loss”, “behavioural issues” and “team work”. This training was introduced by the Department in 2006. The former training covered very similar topics.

Other support for foster carers includes:

- being given information about the child and young person and the placement;
- responding to queries on a wide range of issues including behaviour;
- being given information about the availability of specialist services;
- support for access visits and contact with birth parents and family; and
- planning for the future needs of the child.

CAFS recognises and values the cultural diversity of our community, and will incorporate culturally appropriate support and processes in response to each individual carer and child’s unique needs.

The recognition of cultural background is a vital aspect of planning for and supporting a child or young person in care. For example the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles, which are in the *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997*, identify the need to require that an Aboriginal child should remain within the Aboriginal community. CAFS seeks to work with all cultural bodies and supports cultural planning and engagement for children from diverse backgrounds.

“Children’s case workers undermine authority of carers by not consulting them or including them in decision making processes.”

Issues and concerns from foster carers about communication and support

Carers are saying that better communication is the key to improving the foster care system.

The main areas where foster carers highlighted support issues were:

- in obtaining and regularly updating care plans for every child in care;
- being given background information about the child;
- timely and accessible respite care;

- support and information from the child protection workers about caring for the child;
- maintaining an existing care plan for a child during an initial period when a new worker comes to provide a chance for the new worker to get to know the child and the carer;
- more effective partnership with local schools to support attendance, including for children with behavioural issues or disabilities;

“Lack of support – no-one available when needed. Always changing access visits without notice. Non returning of telephone calls.”

- improve responsiveness for requests (eg regarding school excursions) so the child is not further disadvantaged;
- access and meeting the costs for children for the support services they need such as health, disability, education support or cultural services; and
- availability and opportunity for further training and education of carers.

Communication issues were also of concern to carers. These included communication problems between carers and staff such as not returning phone calls, not advising of delays or cancellation of access visits, and other instances of workers not providing timely information to carers.

Carers seek feedback on what is working well, involvement in planning about the future of foster care and to be accepted as a legitimate and knowledgeable part of the care team.

Ideas from foster carers about communication and support

- There is a need to establish ways to ensure care plans are developed and that foster carers are being consulted throughout the development of plans.
- The Department needs to consult with foster carers in updates and reviews of *The Carer Handbook*.
- Regular and on-going support and contact for both child protection workers and carers (such as a phone call each week just to see how things are going).
- Support service networks are needed for children who are awaiting legal decisions.
- It would be good to have a babysitter pool that can be accessed by all carers at short notice.
- Clarification of who needs police checks in regard to baby sitters and sleepover parents/carers.

“I do not raise matters with the Department (like clarification on items for reimbursement) because my previous experience indicates it is not worth it.”

- Continuity of case workers, and there is a need to notify carers and relevant children-in-care of staff changes.
- Departmental staff should improve their responsiveness to carers’ phone calls and reception staff need to be more friendly.
- If access is cancelled, alternate care for the child should be offered to the carer.

- A departmental post office box for foster children to use when it is inappropriate to use carer's home address would be useful (this would give children who move frequently a constant address and an avenue via which they can be contacted safely; it would also be good for children who want to enter external competitions or stay in touch with organisations like CREATE Foundation etc).
- “More respect from the Department” and “more valuing of foster carers’ opinions in care management decisions”. Poor Departmental relations were cited as primary categories for where better support is required to help foster carers in their role.

“I feel that support is not an issue but collaborative planning and care for the child in care are not adequate.”

- Monthly meetings between regional groups of carers and workers to discuss key issues and allow educational opportunities such as guest speakers talking on particular areas of interest.
- Additional training opportunities for carers dealing with children who have behavioural disorders, traumatic backgrounds, psychological or physical disabilities, or chronic medical conditions.
- Extra support and training for some support workers on how to care for children with special needs or dietary restrictions.

What we are doing on communication and support

- The Department supports, and is participating in, the work being done by the Commissioner for Children leading to a Charter for Children in Out-of-Home Care. The Charter will provide a clear and simple set of statements about the rights that children and young people can expect to be upheld throughout their time in care, as well as explanatory notes about these rights.
- Additional information will be given to carers to clarify the situation around police checks, with regard to babysitters for example.
- The Tasmanian Government is funding FCAT an additional \$50,000 for the establishment of a mentor/buddy system in order to enhance the robustness of carer support; and to organise expert-led local level meetings for foster carers. This funding will also improve access to information regarding the foster care system, the children under care, different modes of support, etc.

“Staff were really good but there is no backup for children. I really enjoy caring but the reality is I have to work part time.”

- The Tasmanian Government is funding CREATE Foundation to help build community connections and trust exercises for children and young people in care.
- The lack of respite care is a significant challenge for CAFS and recruiting respite foster carers will form part of the Department’s foster care recruitment drive.
- The new Child Protection Information System (still under development) will help workers support the needs of foster carers more efficiently. For instance, the database could produce automated notices regarding staff changes, updating care plans, etc.
- Forums with carers will provide an opportunity for the Department to listen and work with carers and develop an ongoing collaborative relationship.
- The Department is encouraging and supporting FCAT to develop a long term plan including strategies to achieve further growth and diversity of its membership.

Carer Payments and Reimbursements

The current foster carer payment system was established in 2004. Since then other Australian states have reviewed their equivalent payments to carers, and CAFS is reviewing the costs identified in its payment guidelines.

As part of this review a group of foster carers were contacted to participate in a telephone survey which further explored carers views on payments and the processes currently used to pay them. Some of their views are also reflected here.

“Inconsistent treatment of carers – I requested some assistance for small equipment and was denied whilst another carer was offered substantial amount of assistance for multiple items for same child.”

Issues and concerns from foster carers about carer payments and reimbursements

- Current payment guidelines and the conditions that allow foster carers to receive reimbursement are too hard to understand.
- There is inconsistency in how the current payment guidelines are being interpreted by workers, especially in regard to reimbursements and additional allowances. Inconsistency is also seen in the different responses to carers as to birth parents.
- Standard payments are seen as inadequate or only “just” covering basic costs of caring for the child and needs to keep pace with inflation and the increased cost of living expenses (eg. food, petrol, electricity etc).
- Foster carers are not always aware of the Departmental insurance policies regarding accidental breakage by children in care.
- Child protection workers must ensure that payment schemes are explained accurately (for instance, some carers are not aware of allowances for children who are still not toilet trained after three years of age).

“Watching the children blossom, communicate, form friendships, participate in activities, overcome their fears, and grow into adulthood as responsible people.”

- The Department must address concerns that payments are not adequate/are not optimal for covering the costs of everyday living.
- Clarification and consistency are needed in the “establishment allowance” and “initial clothing allowance”.
- Be sensitive to the carer when resolving problems arising from overpayments.
- Reimbursements can take any time from one week to over six months before they are received by the carer.
- Improve the process for payments and be open and transparent.
- There is a lack of equity in payments for those who own their homes as opposed to those who rent.

Ideas from foster carers on payments and reimbursements

- Include a summary list of claimable items in *The Carer Handbook*. This could include examples of items that can and can't be claimed, what the standard payment should cover etc.
- Consistency in how workers interpret guidelines with clearer guidelines for workers to ensure less need for interpretation/grey areas.
- Weekly payments, rather than fortnightly, would be better for budgeting.
- Information regarding payments to be reintroduced at foster care training.

Some challenges of foster care are

“Dealing with the Department.”

“It is hard to get support when you need a break – even when you let the right person know and they forget about it.”

- Increase allowance for 3-4 year olds as this age group have additional costs such as training pants (“pull-ups”), additional clothing, pre-school, toys and other entertainment that should be factored into the payment.
- Provide proper travelling bags for children who are removed from home. Some children arrive with all their possessions in garbage bags and it is not nice for the children.
- An allowance or “start up” payment for children who arrive at the carer’s home with nothing (ie. have no spare clothes, bottles, toys etc).
- One off payment to set up new foster carers with large equipment (eg. cots, beds, prams, car seats etc.).
- Allowance for “day only” respite care.
- Department to organise direct (and on time) payments for children who attend regular hours at child care centres, and after school care or include cost in standard payment to carers so they are not out of pocket.
- Departmental workers need to ensure paperwork for payments is processed efficiently to allow timely payments to foster carers.
- Multiple children placed with a carer should receive similar allowance as sibling groups.

“As a family we can provide a safe and happy environment to those in need of care.”

- Drug withdrawal babies should be seen as “special need” placements.
- Introduce a recycle scheme run for and by carers for large equipment, toys, developmental aids etc.
- Recognising days of significance such as:
 - a) establishing an Easter holiday subsidy, in line with Christmas and birthday allowances; and
 - b) taking steps to recognise religious diversity by offering alternative holiday allowances for non-Christian children in care.
- Assess complexity of the care situation at the outset of a placement.

What we are doing

- There has been significant attention drawn to inconsistencies in how the Departmental Payments Guidelines are interpreted. CAFS is at present seeking to clear up this problem by simplifying the guidelines, and to present payment policy in a more user-friendly format that will provide clear definitions of what items and circumstances are eligible for payment or reimbursement.

“I do not know what support would have made a difference – but the support we had was wonderful.”

- CAFS is undertaking a review of payments made to carers. This is in response to FCAT’s concerns that increasing daily living expenses, in particular petrol and electricity costs, are undermining carers’ overall capacity to meet the everyday needs of the children in their care.
- Work is underway on guidelines for staff regarding the payment process in order to improve their response to reimbursement claims.
- The other ideas suggested by carers will be considered and carers will be advised of any changes.

The best aspects of being a foster carer are

“The love and happiness of the children, seeing the children come along and be happy and not worry about anything.”

“Nurturing children with displaced lives. Seeing them settle in and the achievements and steps forward they achieve while they are here. The smiles, the trust they give you.”

Future Directions and Priorities

CAFS has a clear indication from the messages it has heard that areas of their work needing improvement are:

- better direct communication with foster carers;
- responding to foster carer enquiries and concerns;
- providing support and advice when children need additional services;
- taking up the ideas from carers; and
- access to respite.

“Sharing – encouraging to take responsibility to follow own actions. Watching a child make own decision and being able to explain why. Giving a routine non-judgmental home life enabling a child to see different lifestyles to make own future choices.”

A vital outcome from this project is to take the comments of foster carers on board and work together with carers for the benefit of all children in care.

Foster carers have a firm place in the future of child protection in Tasmania. Changes in the way in which child protection services operate in Tasmania, including child protection practices, the supports available to staff and volunteer carers and future plans, are critical elements of what carers need to undertake their essential role effectively.

Consulting carers

Formal and informal consultation strategies are strongly supported by carers.

The foster carer forums were worthwhile for those carers who attended. The feedback on these forums was that attendance would increase when the relationship between carers and departmental staff became more positive and improved.

“Forums for foster carers twice a year organised by CAFS to keep carers up to date on policies, standards, procedures, quality assurance and organisational changes in management.”

This relationship improvement was more likely to come with a demonstration by the Department of goodwill, by dealing with concerns and implementing appropriate suggestions for improvement from carers. Some carers expressed concern at the negative attitude of some other participants, seeing that these carers had not come to the consultations in the spirit of giving feedback, rather they had wanted an opportunity to publicly voice their criticism of the Department.

Carers who are not members of FCAT are concerned that they miss out on important information about policies and new developments in foster caring. There was also concern that the proposal to outsource out of home care as part of the redevelopment of child protection services was not widely known about or understood. The appointment of CAFS Statewide Manager, Out of Home Care was acknowledged as a positive step that should be supported by regular direct communication with carers.

Forums were more likely to be well attended when they were held in local communities, rather than a single venue for an area and the availability of child care was an essential element. Those who attended generally would attend further forums. The agenda for future foster carer forums should include opportunities to explore what was working well, as much as airing problems and concerns.

“By the way, I love being a foster carer. It is very rewarding to help children and their families and I have very good workers on both sides (children and OOHC).”

Next steps

A quality foster care system will provide children in care with the opportunity to responsibly shape their own future. Foster care must occur in a caring and protective environment to fulfil our mutual commitment towards encouraging children in care to become self-reliant contributors to Tasmanian society.

The messages of Tasmanian foster carers will act as a guide for the future determination of CAFS policy. The forums for foster carer communities in the northern, north-western and southern areas of the State will give carers the chance to speak frankly and collectively about their thoughts on the positive and negative aspects of the current system.

Would you recommend foster caring?

“There is a perception that all foster kids have behavioural problems which is simply not the case. My experiences to date have been personally rewarding.”

The results will then be used to provide:

- advice to the Director of CAFS about the issues and what needs to be done;
- information to help the development of a state-wide campaign to attract new foster carers and keep those we have;
- input to the training and development of staff in child protection and other areas of CAFS; and
- advice on future surveys and consultations with foster carers.

Comments and future issues

Reader comments on this paper and on issues for foster carers are very welcome.

Please contact

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“There are no substitutes for listening to what those involved want”