

***SUPPORTING STRONG PARENTING
IN THE AUSTRALIAN
FOSTER CARE SECTOR***

A STUDY CONDUCTED BY THE
AUSTRALIAN FOSTER CARE
ASSOCIATION

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***A CONDENSED VERSION OF THE REPORT FOR
WIDER DISTRIBUTION***

PART A – AN OVERVIEW OF THE INVESTIGATION

PART B – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

Part A – AN OVERVIEW OF THE INVESTIGATION

SECTION ONE: FOSTER CARE IN AUSTRALIA

Background to the study

The study reported in these pages was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services to assess support provisions for foster carers and address issues to do with the prevention of abuse within the foster care sector. Since no national study of foster care of this kind has been conducted, the study was expected to provide some useful insights at a macro level. Further, because most foster care practice has tended to occur at the State level in Australia, it was expected that the study would confirm the existence of differences in policies and practices across the States/Territories. These variations could both enlighten practitioners and encourage the development of good practice throughout the whole country particularly through an ongoing forum for the sharing and exchange of information.

Conceptual analyses

The study undertook an inclusive analysis of the structure and processes of the sector with the intention of encouraging more strategic thinking about the whole of foster caring in this country. Recognition is given in this analysis to the range of stakeholders from government representatives through to extended families of the children in care, who provided information and insight.

Foster care is a government provision for children who need state care and protection. While governments at all levels have a legitimate interest in these responsibilities, much of the welfare and protection services for children has rested with State/Territory governments.

While part of this provision has long been contracted out through non-government providers, a recent trend has seen a strong leaning towards purchaser-provider arrangements for the delivery of foster care in all States and Territories. In some States/Territories, the administrative details for this kind of arrangement are still being negotiated. In others the concept has yet to be accepted, let alone implemented. The ramifications of full purchaser-provider arrangements for the provision of foster care services through non-government agencies has still to be experienced.

Present day approaches to evaluating government services, as exemplified in the work of the Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, have yet to be applied to the foster care sector. Indeed, much work will need to be done to express objectives and desirable outcomes along with suitable performance indicators before any

systematic evaluation of foster care services can be undertaken. This report offers some starting points for the possible establishment of objectives and performance measures.

Supportive empirical data

As part of the study and in an effort to get as accurate information as possible about foster carers and the support they receive, and to base statements and conclusions on social research evidence, a national survey of carers was undertaken. Logistical difficulties, stemming from the organisational deficiencies of the sector meant that the survey could not be distributed as scientifically as would have been desirable, but the 812 responses received, have come from foster carers in all States and Territories, from both government and non-government carers, and from both urban and country based carers throughout Australia. It thus represents the first national survey of foster carers ever conducted in this country. The results are seminal for policy, administration and research work that needs to be undertaken in the foster care sector.

Included in the report are some limited but relevant materials from national and international publications.

In keeping with modern day organisational research, this present study also introduced some modest benchmarking as a means of comparing foster care in this country with what is being done overseas. It is hoped, by doing this, to stimulate thinking about standards, good practice and continuous improvement within the sector. The benchmarking undertaken has been deliberately restricted to a very limited number of aspects of foster care and has been done with the cooperation of the Alberta Foster Parents Association in Canada.

The Provision of Foster Care(rs)

The report provides a national overview of foster care as a means of providing out-of-home care for children in need of support and protection. After a cursory review of historical precursors to foster caring, and a review of some of the terms and definitions in vogue in foster care, the study raises some fundamental issues about the purpose of caring for children and young people in foster homes. It makes the claim that the purpose, other than the reactive one of providing emergency accommodation to children without a home, is not particularly clear.

The report goes on to draw on data from the carer survey to present some descriptive statistics about carers. For example, the results show that many foster carers undertake several different kinds of fostering from respite care through to high support care. About 60 percent of the survey respondents are currently involved in interim foster care arrangements, while 31 percent are involved in long-term or permanent foster care. Six percent are involved in high support care. The survey respondents cover both non-government agencies (39%) and government provision (53%) with a small percentage (3%) saying they are engaged by both

non-government agencies and the relevant government department. Forty-two percent of respondents had been fostering for between 1 and 5 years and 25 percent had been fostering between 6 and 10 years. A few, indeed, have been fostering for up to 40 years or even more. The analysis also shows that the burden of caring for children in the foster care system is disproportionately carried by a relatively small number of carers.

The analysis of the foster care sector is also extended to, and presented in, systems terms with inputs, processes and outputs. This is a concept that is developed later to some degree in the report to show the interrelatedness of structures and processes in providing both care for children and support for carers.

Attention is drawn also to the very sensitive issue of Indigenous children in care and the need for the foster care sector and those in administrative, worker and carer roles to take seriously the issues highlighted in the *Bringing them Home* report.

SECTION TWO: FOSTER CARERS AND SUPPORT

Roles and status of foster carers

The report describes and analyses the roles and status of foster carers because role confusion and the lack of appropriate status are very evident sources of stress and distress within the foster care sector. It draws attention to the essential voluntary nature of foster care and seeks to outline some of the apparent issues and possible reasons for the confusion and stress experienced by foster carers which arise from this. It also touches on some steps that might be taken to address the issues.

An estimate of the number of foster carers in Australia is provided, rather than an accurate figure because until now, no-one has apparently attempted to find out exactly how many there are. This strange fact is a consequence also of the fact that no national statistics are regularly collected on foster carers, and there is no national register of or system for accrediting carers – not even, it seems, in state government departments.

There are also definitional problems associated with counting the number of foster carers. Non-government organisations may have complete lists of all of the carers that they have engaged, but this is information that the agencies are not required to provide to anyone else, and as a rule do not provide. Foster care associations likewise have mailing lists, but they are not for public consumption, and may indeed be far from complete. Furthermore, in addition to being lists of current members, they often include others who are not carers.

Other characteristics of carers have been quantified as a result of the carer survey. A little at odds with the popular stereotype of foster carers is the finding that carers in this sample have a more professional occupational profile. That is, 41 percent of carers are employed as professionals, managers/administrators or para-professionals whereas thirty percent are clerks,

salespersons, labourers, tradespersons or plant/machine operators/drivers. A further 20 percent have no breadwinner employed in the family. There is some need to be cautious about these results because the better educated carers may have been more willing and ready to respond to the survey thus biasing the outcome. Consistent with this occupational finding is the result of questions about formal education. The profile for carers is much the same as for the total population, though it appears that more foster carers had higher degrees than in the general population.

In summary, it can be said of foster carers in Australia, that they are almost exclusively volunteers, have come into foster care mainly because they have long known about it or it has been part of their own family background. They are mainly in the 35 to 54 year old bracket with the majority of these (38 percent overall) being between 45 and 54. They come from a wide range of occupational backgrounds and their educational qualifications are equally wide. If anything they tend to be more highly qualified than the population as a whole.

Both foster children and foster carers themselves have high opinions of the capabilities and quality of foster care being provided. Foster carers know all too well the demands, responsibilities and strictures of being carers, yet they are equally of the opinion that administrators and government workers do not give credence, on the whole, to the skills and knowledge of carers. Nor do they acknowledge the work done by carers and the load that they carry.

A recent study in one State has analysed the reasons why foster carers in that state had ceased fostering between 1997 and 1999. Eleven percent ceased caring following an allegation of abuse being made about them; 20% left because of disagreement with the Department; 33% left because of lack of support from the Department; 33% left because of the impact of fostering on their own family; 24% indicated that the child's behaviour was a reason for their decision. These results underscore the seriousness to foster care of the relationship between carers and the government officials – a point the study returns to on several occasions.

From an impartial and analytical point of view it is easy to see that a level of resentment is likely to arise when there are two groups of people vested with responsibility for looking after children in care: one, a group of paid employees whose involvement with the children is generally within regular working hours, and are not intimately associated with the children; and another group who are unpaid volunteers whose involvement with the children is around the clock, who are intimately associated with the children, and who are constantly exposed to the possibility of allegations of abuse, physical violence or damage to property.

Continuing on the roles and status of foster carers, the report looks at recruitment and selection of carers and at training, registration and accreditation. These are all pivotal functions for a quality foster care service, yet the information uncovered leads to the conclusion that all of these are poorly handled aspects of foster care. Reports were received, indeed, that there are many carers undertaking fostering without going through due processes of assessment, selection and training, and that training where provided often is minimal. Quite apart from the question of whether this is good practice, and whether some children/young people are going to be seriously traumatised by being placed with inappropriate and untrained

carers, deficiency in these components of foster care leave the door open for potentially damaging duty of care allegations and litigation against carers and governments.

The report concludes that it is advisable that the sector moves as quickly as possible toward a system of national registration and accreditation for carers so that optimum protection exists for children, carers and administrations.

Placement processes and practice are also considered in the report. The researchers were left with the disturbing impression that matching of placements is a lower order consideration behind the urgency of getting a child placed as quickly and conveniently as possible. The specific requirement, explicit in the placement principle of locating Aboriginal children in Indigenous settings is surely relevant to children of all cultural and religious backgrounds. Yet many reports were received not only of children being placed in culturally inappropriate homes, but of Indigenous foster care contracts being let to non-Indigenous organisations.

The situation with kinship care, as a subset of foster care, raised many questions for the researchers. There is evidence that kinship care, at least in some States/Territories, is increasing and becoming more prevalent than traditional foster care. Yet the impression gained is that kinship care receives far less support than 'mainstream' foster care. If this is true, it is a matter for serious consideration since there are no grounds for assuming that kinship carers are necessarily more able and likely to undertake better the role of fostering than non-kinship carers. Yet this seems to be an implicit assumption behind the differences in support provisions between mainstream carers and kinship carers.

The debate, more evident overseas than in Australia, about the professionalisation of foster care, is raised in the report because there are aspects of this debate which should not be ignored. There is growing evidence that children going into care have special and serious needs. With increasing tendency towards litigation and the increasing needs of children, it is very difficult to sustain an argument that foster family settings are 'just like normal families'. Arguments in favour of professionalising foster care can be very persuasive. While the report does not advocate the wholesale professionalisation of foster care in Australia, it does concur with the conclusion of the UK Joint Working Party on Foster Care, that *a more professional foster care service is required with foster carers playing their role as full partners in fostering teams* - a position that will necessitate better supervision structures and a greater emphasis on specialised training.

Meanings and sources of support

The report seeks to clarify what is meant by 'support' in the context of foster care. Data from the carer survey and other data-gathering opportunities, shows the wide range of interpretations given by carers, and we can assume that other stakeholders in foster care would give the word still other meanings. We have attempted to keep an open stance on its meaning, starting with the view that the whole foster care system is a support system developed to provide support for children who do not have the support provisions of a natural family.

This analysis led to several broad conclusions. First, it can be set in a context of mutual obligation, in that foster carers are providing a service for the community (looking after children), free of charge and thereby saving the community as represented in the governments of the country, many hundreds of thousands of dollars. In return for this service, foster carers are entitled to an appropriate level of support.

Second, support finds its expression in structural provisions. These structural components, we have identified as:

- Government – a formal, legal and mandated role;
- Professionals – a purchased role;
- Agencies – a purchased (contracted) role;
- Associations – a representative and volunteer role;
- Carer Networks and extended families– informal, unofficial, unpaid;
- Carers – a formal, but volunteer role.

All of these structural components are to be found in each of the States/Territories of Australia, though we would probably have to say that some components are much weaker than others, and that the whole does not function as a well integrated and supportive system in any State/Territory in Australia.

In addition to looking at the foster care system as a structure, it is important to consider the processes and functions fulfilled in support of carers, and through them the children in care. The report presents a strategic overview of processes as well as an analysis of the varying levels of detailed processes and kinds of support (actual and potential) that are offered, by whom and to whom.

The importance of support to carers is highlighted by the survey results, where 84 percent of respondents rated support as absolutely essential (54%) or very important (30%) and only 3 percent indicated that they could manage without it. Bearing this in mind, the fact that 41 percent of respondents indicated in the survey that they got 'just enough support to get by on' is disturbing. More than half of the respondents rated the quality of support as 'average' (35%) 'very poor' (12%) or 'extremely poor' (4%). Non-government agency engaged foster carers in the survey receive significantly more and better support than do government engaged carers.

A particularly interesting finding, however, is that the most support by far is received by carers from their families and friends (with 55 percent of respondents saying they received a great deal or quite a lot of support from this source). Non-government agencies were the next best source (at 31%). Government departments were not seen as a strong source of support with 46 percent saying they got very little or no support from their relevant State/Territory department.

A number of quite specific kinds of support were also canvassed in the survey, from after hours support to printed manuals/guidebooks and support from carer associations. Carers were also given the chance to provide their own explanations of the kind of support they believed they should get but did not receive. The list is extensive covering the following:

- Resourcing issues
- Departmental issues
- Children in care issues
- Relief/respite
- Health and safety issues
- Justice issues
- Professionalism issues
- Relationship issues
- Training/equipping issues, and
- Other issues.

Financial support is an ongoing issue with foster carers and their associations. Because it is being studied on a quite wide front by a number of people, this study made it a minor aspect of the project, and did not include any related questions in the survey.

From work in progress, and so that this study did not have a significant gap, we have included materials already compiled on the issue of financial support. The range of subtopics covered show how contentious this issue is, how widely divergent across the country is the range and number of issues, and how variable are the current financial provisions from State to State.

Support provisions in Australia

In this section of the report an attempt was made to give a more detailed account of the actual support provisions in place in Australia. This was done under a structure relating to support processes earlier identified, namely:

1. Recruitment of new carers
 - Advertising, enlistment and recruitment
 - Initiation/orientation
 - Suitability assessment and screening of applicants
 - Initial training, assessment and registration
 - Provision of handbook and materials
 - Startup support
2. Placement
 - First child
 - Subsequent children
 - Information
 - Meetings with workers/birth parents

3. Development and maintenance of fostering expertise and motivation
 - Advanced training & conference attendance
 - Advanced information management (case management) & record keeping
 - Respite
 - Carer family support
 - Peer support
 - Networking
 - Structural support
 - Emergency support
 - Special needs
 - Allegations of abuse

Recruitment is obviously crucial because it is the entry point for carers to fostering. A number of current inadequacies in recruitment are highlighted. The impression gained in the course of this study was that recruitment is rarely conducted in a systematic targeted manner, possibly because there is little systematic analysis of need.

A range of recruitment methods and media are used within each State/Territory, with word of mouth still probably the most relied upon method. Some advertising and promotional marketing campaigns are conducted, but lack of resources is a constant restraining issue. There is a need for national marketing of fostering and efforts to raise the profile of foster care in the community, but no national foster organisation is in position to do this. Reliance on non-professionals to conduct marketing is a less than ideal, but necessary strategy. Delays in training also often detract from the initial enthusiasm of enquirers.

Orientation and initiation of prospective carers is also done with variable quality and professionalism throughout the country. Carer ratings of the quality of information given to them when they first asked about becoming foster carers suggests clearly that there is room for improvement in this area.

States/Territories approach the training and assessment of potential carers in a variety of ways though the basics tend to be much the same. Introductory and initial training received extremely good or very good rating from over (70 percent of respondents). Subsequent training, however, was not rated so well. While two states have training courses that have attracted national accreditation, this is but a start. There is a desperate need for training to be put on an standard basis across the country, and for it to be of the best possible quality. Further, in a truly good practice provision environment, there ought to be a fully graded, regularly updated, and comprehensive training package available to foster carers throughout Australia.

Unfortunately, even were this training provision to be made available, many carers feel unable to pay the costs involved in undertaking it. Hence there needs also to be some consideration given to subsidising training for carers to ensure that cost of training is never an excuse for not undergoing appropriate skilling for this responsible task.

A series of questions in the survey revealed that foster carers typically draw on information to assist them from a very wide range of sources. A disturbing proportion claimed that they didn't receive any formal information after making their first inquiry about becoming foster carers and the largest proportion got their information mostly from other carers, parents and friends. It is good that they can call on this circle of people close to them, but it also seems to indicate that more could be done to make sure that a ready source of professionally prepared and presented information is available for carers rather than leave carers to find it for themselves.

The report contains detailed information about the proportion of respondents who had a printed manual or guidebook to help them (65%), how important it was in their estimation to have printed material available (85% considering it to be very or extremely necessary) and how many rated the quality of this material as very good or extremely good (67%). These figures ought to be expected to be much nearer to 100% in all cases.

Many other kinds and sources of information are possible and available. Such diversity is deemed important for the best possible communication to the widest range of people. It is not certain in Australia whether the quality, consistency and accuracy of this range of information is as good as it might be.

Placement is another issue at the centre of foster care. If placement is not undertaken appropriately and well, there is a much greater possibility of subsequent breakdown, and much less likelihood that children and young people placed in care will be able to deal effectively with previous abuse, neglect and trauma.

The survey reports have led us to believe that placement practices throughout Australia are much less than ideal. For good matching to occur there must be a surplus of foster carers over children/young people needing placement in every category of care. If there is not such a surplus, matching will be unlikely to go much beyond identifying a need and a vacancy reasonably near at hand. A survey in one state revealed that 42 percent of carers who ceased fostering were not caring for their preferred age group of children which begs the question as to what other level of matching could be possible or even attempted.

The matching issue is also particularly pertinent to the issue of Indigenous and culturally specific placements. Despite the prominence given to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principle, it is clear that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are not being placed in culturally appropriate homes, and little is known or in the open about culturally specific placements. A very simple explanation of the non-adherence to the placement principle is that there are insufficient carers available in these categories of need – an explanation which brings the debate full circle to the issue of recruitment. It also reinforces the necessity to properly assess the fostering needs of children in care, and to recruit many more carers in relevant categories

Placement issues also relate directly to the purpose of foster care, discussed in other parts of the report, and the need to distinguish between foster care which has reunification at its heart,

and foster care which is of necessity long term and with little prospect or intention of seeing the natural family being reunited.

Another disturbing and puzzling aspect of placement practice described in the report relates to the information provided to carers at the time a child/young person is placed in their care. The carer survey found that 72 percent of carers rated the information about the foster child being placed with them as average, very poor, or extremely poor. Foster carers have indicated that they often receive no information at all, or very little, in the way of background of a child. Carers have been lobbying departments for this situation to change. The response appears to be very slow. A lack of suitable information about children coming into care is fraught with danger for both the carer and their family and the child in care.

The whole issue of information management in this sector is of growing importance and is alluded to at various points in the report, from high level statistical reporting to grass roots case management reporting. Information gathering and management can easily become onerous if not done with common sense. Proponents of information management systems such as the *Looking After Children* material are attempting to overcome the deficiencies in this area, but it appears that there are many carers who are not persuaded that the LAC system is the ideal solution. There is little doubt that concerted and integrated steps need to be taken to address the information needs at all levels.

Respite for foster carers is a particularly important kind of support. Foster children/young people have been reported to be three to six times more likely than children not in care, to have emotional, behavioural or developmental problems. For foster carers of these children, respite care is particularly important to alleviate the ongoing pressures on them. A needs assessment in one State reported that the greatest need raised by foster carers, was the need for respite care to be provided on a more regular basis. Evidence is to hand that there are not enough respite carers available, that foster carers were left to organise their own respite (often with family) and that when a child was on respite, any subsidy payments being made to the carer were suspended during the period of respite. Several overseas strategies for providing respite care could be adopted in this country and should be examined urgently as a way of fulfilling an urgent need but also as a safeguard against burnout and resignation from caring by carers who are desperately in need of relief.

Carer family support and peer support are important secondary issues that tend always to be put aside when time and resources are limited. Yet without exception carers would say that carer families have significant needs because of the extra stresses brought about by the presence of one or more foster children in the home. Many carers have sought respite, encouragement and advice from their fellow carers. Informal networks have been created all over the country but there are still many carers who are isolated. Because there are no central cooperative databases of carers, it is not certain how many carers there may be who are not being drawn into the formal networks of Associations. A few of the State/Territory Associations receive minimal funding for their activities – others receive none. Hence from a structural perspective, the Associations are the weakest link, and because of the lack of

resources are unable to undertake the supportive and representative tasks that they were set up to achieve.

Respondents to the carer survey indicated that large numbers of foster carers have at some time had need to call an emergency 24 hour help line. While there are such help lines available in all States/Territories, only 35 percent of respondents rated the service as very good or extremely good and 34 percent rated it as average, very poor or extremely poor. This would seem to indicate that there is room for improvement in this support provision.

The majority of comments made thus far have been about mainstream, basic fostering. There are in this field as in every endeavour, special needs. The degree of support for carers caring for children and young people with special needs also varies significantly across States and Territories. In most States, additional services and funding are allocated on the basis of the needs of the child, and carers have believed, logically, that if the child were to move, the support and funding would follow. Many have found, however, that this is not the case. There is also sometimes a decrement in support provision because the responsible parts of the department or different departments concerned may be in conflict over where bureaucratic responsibility lies (eg. when child protection and disability areas of government agencies are both involved in the one case).

The almost unanimous opinion amongst carers is that the subsidies offered to carers to cover their expenses have never been sufficient for the purpose. Each State/Territory government has its own methods for determining what is a suitable allowance, and the approaches used results in differences between all States/Territories. Further, the model used in a number of these calculations for determining the costs of raising children (Loving) is considered by the Australian Institute of Family Studies to be out of date and better models are available but not yet being used.

Comparative analyses of foster payments were initiated by the Standing Committee of Community Services and Income Support Administrators, and are now being carried on independently by the contributors to the original analysis. These analyses show the considerable variation in standard allowances between States/Territories in Australia and New Zealand, and document also the discrepancies in the range of add-on, contingency and discretionary payments that are available. The list of considerations that carers believe should be addressed is extensive and requires serious attention to remove the inequities in the current system of payments.

Financial support and personal support for carers when an allegation of abuse has been made against them are two particularly sensitive and contentious issues within foster care. This study has made only summary comments about the financial concerns because these matters are under study in a variety of other settings. Allegations of abuse, on the other hand, is an area with pressing needs and which has thus far received inadequate attention and action from any source.

Support for carers when an allegation of abuse has been made emerged as one of the most contentious issues for carers throughout Australia. Due recognition is given for the fact that real cases of abuse should be exposed and dealt with appropriately, but there are many cases of unsubstantiated allegations, and in these cases, carers are left largely without support, and their own families generally suffer significantly from the experience. While only 23 percent of respondents in the carer survey reported that they had been subject to an allegation of abuse, it is widely known that carers are not always told that they have been investigated. It is also widely assumed among carers that there is an inevitability about the experience, which means that few will escape having an allegation brought against them. Forty-three percent of carers said that they knew of carers who have ceased fostering because of a lack of support at the time of an allegation of abuse.

Twenty-three to 30 percent of carers said that no support had been received from the expected agencies or department sources of support when they had been subjected to an allegation of abuse. Respondents indicated that when support was given, family and friends, fellow carers and carer associations were the top sources of support. Government departments were seen by 40 percent of respondents as offering extremely poor support.

Survey respondents provided explanations as to what they considered was missing most in the level of support given to them, and suggestions about the most important improvements that could be made. Included in the list of suggestions were the following:

- Preparation
- Information during training on procedures
- Legal links/contact/advice/representation
- Independent advice on rights, entitlements, process, expectations
- Someone available 24 hrs a day
- Timely support
- Should not be considered guilty until proved innocent but innocent until proved guilty.

A significant amount of research is now being conducted overseas into the handling of allegations of abuse in foster settings, and many recommendations are being made about how to support foster carers and make the process more equitable. The findings from overseas studies seem to be entirely applicable to Australia, and more concerted efforts ought to be made to deal with this problem here.

In one state, a Carer Allegations Support Team (CAST) has been initiated, but lack of adequate resources has meant that this model has not yet been fully implemented. Like the Alberta Foster Allegations Support Team reported in a later chapter of this report, the approach aims to bring about much improved processes through cooperative and open information sharing and support arrangements.

Child abuse and the foster care system

Child abuse is rightfully a major concern of the community. Foster care is a service which by association is closely involved with issues of child abuse. A majority of children who come into foster care have been abused. Foster care ought therefore to be a safe haven for these children and one in which they are able to deal effectively with previous traumas.

A major concern to the foster care sector is the incidence of alleged abuse within foster care homes. It is all the more surprising therefore that this study found it particularly difficult to obtain information on the incidence of abuse within foster care. Limited data has been uncovered in AIHW statistical reports which show that for three Australian states the incidence of substantiated abuse and neglect in foster care homes was 2, 4 and 1 percent respectively. Statistics on abuse and neglect in kinship care is likewise incomplete, but data from the same source shows 3,6,2,and 19 percent of substantiation's in kinship homes for four states. In both cases the rate is much lower than for abuse in natural families (typically 20 to 30 percent).

If these figures are indicative of the true situation, then what is commonly believed in the foster care sector is probably true, that while allegations of abuse may be higher in the foster care sector than in the general population, substantiations are much lower. The reality is that at the present moment with incomplete statistics on the subject, the true situation is not known.

Overseas studies have attempted to provide more extensive and accurate information on abuse in foster homes, and studies from both the UK and USA suggest that the incidence of abuse in foster settings is much higher.

It is important in Australia that statistics be collected and made public on the incidence of abuse in both foster and kinship care. Until accurate statistics are kept, those who would want to address the problem of abuse of children within foster care settings are unable to do so in an informed manner.

The issue of systems abuse is a separate but related issue. In this present study, systems abuse emerged as a much more important and pervasive problem than one to one abuse. Anecdotal evidence was widespread. Furthermore, previous work undertaken for the NSW Child Protection Council (Cashmore *et al*), has already alerted many to the reality and extent of the problem in government provision for children. However, little appears to have happened to address the issues identified in this work.

The forms of systems abuse identified in the Cashmore et al study include:

- a. Children's needs are not considered
 - *"invisible child"*
 - *secondary victimisation*
- b. Services are effectively not available
 - *nonexistent*
 - *inadequate*
 - *inappropriate*

- *inaccessible - due to entry requirements*
 - *geographically*
 - *linguistically*
 - *culturally*
 - *through lack of information*
- c. Services are not properly organised and coordinated
 - *"pillar to post"*
 - *"not my responsibility"*
 - *discontinuity*
- d. Institutional abuse, i.e. direct abuse occurring within an organisation
 - *corporal punishment*
 - *neglect, physical, sexual and emotional abuse in foster care, residential institutions or agencies caring for children*

Cashmore et al were particularly focused on the abuse and neglect of children in the system. It became patently clear in the course of the current study that virtually all the forms of systems abuse identified for children had an equivalent form in relation to foster carers. They too are the victims of systems abuse.

This is not to downgrade the importance of systems abuse for children, but to add another layer to its recognition. Through the adoption of clearer objectives for foster care, standards, charters and performance measures, some of this systems abuse may be addressed and reduced.

SECTION THREE: FOSTER CARE AND IMPROVEMENT

Good practice in foster care

A subsidiary goal of the present study was to gather information on good practice in foster care. The goal suffered from the same difficulties as the study in general, that is, the problem of obtaining information. Several approaches were taken to identifying good practice. We asked carers, association representatives, non-government agencies and departmental officers for examples. Conference attendees were also asked to submit examples. While a number of individuals did offer suggestions, the definition of 'good practice' became an issue as had the definition of 'support'. It became evident that there were varying and legitimate perspective's such that what could be seen as good practice to government administrators was different from what would be seen as good practice by carers. Workers and non-government agency administrators had different perspective's again.

The researchers were reminded on a number of occasions that any serious discussion about 'good practice' must inevitably come to the question of standards. That is, good practice almost always needs to be defined in relation to something else – it is a concept of relativity. While good practice may be defined in the first instance by simply denoting examples, thereafter, structures, processes and practices will be defined as good or poor in relation to the

exemplars. On the other hand if in a process of consultation with all stakeholders, a broad set of standards is developed and accepted, that set of standards is the obvious starting point for identifying good practice in the sector.

Since there are yet no widely accepted and comprehensive standards, the search for good practice in Australian foster care is bound to be piecemeal and fraught with definitional difficulties.

The need to identify good practice is psychological and motivational as well as academic. As the concept of good practice takes hold in the provision of services, it becomes an inspiration to those who are providing the services, and a motivator to "lift one's game", so as not to be seen to be providing an inferior service.

Providing standards, however, is pivotal to quality provision. It ensures that service is comprehensive and complete. Hence the report draws attention to some early attempts to define standards in foster care in Australia, notes the Standards recently defined as part of the UK Joint Working Party on Foster Care work, and argues that the establishment of an adequate statement of foster standards should be a high priority in this country.

A corollary to the establishment of standards is the definition of performance indicators and the setting up of a process for monitoring performance. While attempts to define foster care standards so far in Australia have been well-intentioned, we are not aware of anyone seriously addressing the question of performance monitoring. It is possible that some non-government agencies may undertake performance monitoring within their own organisations. The issue is being raised here though in the context of the total sector.

Performance monitoring goes hand in hand with resource provision, of course, and since significant resources have not been put into the foster care sector, this may be the explanation as to why there has been no urgency about defining standards and performance indicators.

The argument is presented here that only good can come from the cautious, sensitive and sensible development of a set of agreed indicators across States/Territories so that foster care service in this country can be effectively monitored.

In terms of identifying good practice in foster care, we are hesitant to set down in this report examples of what we or others might consider to be good practice in Australia. This is because our coverage is so limited both in terms of spread and in terms of awareness that we are certain that we would misrepresent the sector in attempting the task.

Benchmarking with Alberta

The report covers some benchmarking material that we obtained from the Alberta Foster Parents Association in Alberta, Canada. Some Australian foster carers have had some association with carers from Alberta in the past, and it seemed a good opportunity to make a direct comparison with an overseas foster carer organisation, and in particular one which was

known to be undertaking some innovative work in relation to supporting foster carers who have had an allegation of abuse brought against them. Although it was in relation to the Foster Carer Allegations Support Team that the Alberta Foster Parents Association was contacted, some interesting and useful information was obtained from them also about a classification system that is in use there.

It was also considered important to begin a process of benchmarking in the foster care sector, since this is a well-established organisation technique in the business sector for improving organisational performance. Products, services, organisational teams or entire organisations may be compared with other organisations or competitors as a means of both assessing performance against others, and also stimulating improved performance and a program of continuous improvement.

Benchmarking could be undertaken in Australia, if State/Territory foster care organisations (government, non-government or voluntary) were to make comparisons with each other on clearly defined areas and dimensions of their work.

The Alberta Foster Parents Association have relatively recently introduced a classification system for foster homes, in order to better match the requirements of children with the skills, interests and assessment of carers. The system introduced has four levels:

- *Approved Foster Home (Level I)*
- *Qualified Foster Home (Level II)*
- *Advanced Foster Home (Level III)*
- *Specialized Foster Home (Level IV)*

Under this system all foster parents must complete Level 1 training. The following description of the system points up several aspects in which the Alberta system is providing a better system than is provided in Australia:

The child welfare worker places the child in a foster home with help from the foster care worker. The workers choose the most suitable family after consulting with everyone involved. They make every attempt to place the child with a family whose skills match the child's needs, that lives in the child's local community and that has a similar linguistic, cultural and religious background as the child.

The foster care worker assists the foster family to perform its care-giving role. The worker also assists the family to participate in the services for the child and to meet the child's specific needs.

The foster care worker reviews the foster home when changes happen in the home that might affect the foster care services it provides (e.g. a move or a birth). Also, the worker evaluates each foster home yearly to make sure that it is meeting the service standards. A home that is unsatisfactory may be closed, put on six month remedial probation or suspended for up to six months.

The basic maintenance rates cover the following types of expenses: food, personal care needs, spending money for the foster child, household items (including insurance premiums), clothing and miscellaneous items. The child welfare worker makes sure that the child has adequate clothing when placed. After that, the maintenance rate covers clothing replacement due to seasonal changes and the child's normal growth. Miscellaneous items include babysitting, gifts and mileage for appointments or special events.

This may be a somewhat idealised description, but to the extent that it is true, it contrasts quite markedly with the descriptive material we have received about placement services in Australia. The use of a classification system also has a great deal to commend it, but agreement on what the levels should be, would need to be reached first in Australian States and Territories.

The particular interest that this present study had in the Alberta system was to do with the process for handling allegations of abuse. It seems that the Alberta Foster Parents Association has pioneered a support structure and process going under the name of *Foster Allegation Support Team (FAST)*.

Some particular points noted are:

- *Under legislation all allegations of abuse on a child are referred to the same investigating agency regardless of whether it is in a foster home or not;*
- *"Foster Parents are viewed as an integral part of the team";*
- *Investigations are to be handled in a particularly sensitive, expedient and thorough fashion because of "the nature of the work provided by the foster parents and the risk of allegation";*
- *As foster parents are team members, the investigations must be completed by a senior investigator;*
- *The investigator is not to be a worker assigned to the child and supervisor;*
- *The following information is stressed (bolded in their material)*
 - ***Due to the nature of the work provided by foster parents they are at high risk of false allegations;***
 - ***Foster home investigations can be very traumatic for the foster family as well as the foster children especially if children are removed from the home (remember that all foster children have experienced the investigation process when removed from their biological homes);***
 - ***Foster parents who have had false allegations against them or have experienced poorly handled investigations, may be reluctant to accept future placements of children who have made allegations, children with difficult parental involvement or physically and sexually acting out children;***
 - ***Foster parent investigations must be handled in a sensitive, expedient and thorough fashion and they need to be kept informed on the investigation process;***
- *The investigation is to begin immediately and the family informed that an investigation is occurring. They are also to be advised about and encouraged to use the services of the Foster Allegation Support Team (F.A.S.T.);*

- *During the investigation, the carer continues to receive support from their assigned Foster Care Worker, as well as the 'Resource Specialist' – "the working relationship must be maintained in order to assist the placement resource (carer) through the investigation process. Contact will need to be enhanced during this process to ensure adequate support and information is provided";*
- *The carer is informed as soon as possible about the (F.A.S.T.) – and a FAST representative can be present during the investigation interview(s);*
- *The purpose of the investigation is to ensure the safety of the child;*
- *If an agency carer is being investigated a letter is sent to the agency;*
- *A decision is made about the appropriateness of continuing to use the foster home as a resource;*
- *The Foster Care worker must, within 20 calendar days of the completion of the investigation, advise the foster family about the status of the home, the reason for decisions and the review/appeal procedure. (This is to be presented to the foster parents in a letter.)*
- *The outcome of the investigation must be clearly explained to the child, the care giver, the child welfare worker and the agency representative.*

If there is an allegation of abuse made against a foster carer, and the allegation is not sustained, then the carer's legal costs are met as an ex gratia payment from the government.

Almost all of this stands in stark contrast to what we have been told by foster carers about the processes surrounding allegations of abuse in Australia. There are both cultural and procedural differences which would suggest that the process in Alberta is indeed an example of good practice.

A number of other contrasts are made between the foster care system in Australia and that to be found in Alberta, in the body of the report.

SECTION FOUR: A WAY AHEAD

On the basis of the material gathered in the course of this study, the researchers felt confined to the conclusion that the foster care sector as a whole is highly fragmented, somewhat confused about its purpose, dangerously under-resourced, demoralised and discordant and in need of urgent attention.

This may seem a very negative and even harsh conclusion to draw. It was not done in ignorance of the many good things that are being done 'out there'. The perception is that where good things are being done and achieved it is because of the outstanding work of certain individuals and despite the weaknesses and inadequacies of the foster care systems and structures.

The sector's importance is not in doubt because it is the primary means by which infants, children and young people who have had a bad start in life, have a chance to compensate for that bad start. The evidence is strong that if good compensatory provisions are not made for such children, their futures may well be far below their potential.

That as many children have 'got through the system' successfully as have, is a credit to themselves and the foster carers who have given so much of themselves to provide positive and loving substitute parenting. But because of long-held views about foster children and about foster carers, there is still a lot to be done about improving community attitudes and government provisions so that foster care becomes the effective, quality support service that it could be.

Reviews in New South Wales (Community Services Commission 2000), Victoria (Carter, 2000), Tasmania (Ransley, 2000) and South Australia (Barber, In press) have all independently drawn attention in unequivocal terms to the failings of the foster care sector in those states.

The system is 'straining' under a lack of resources, a lack of adequate support for carers (and their families), a lack of effective and efficient policies, procedures and infrastructure. The whole system appears to be heavily blighted by discordant relationships and a lack of cooperative approach. The carer segment of the sector is highly critical of government administration, administrators and workers. The strength and extent of the negative comments made leads to the inescapable conclusion, however, that there are attitudes and practices prevailing in government agencies that are not conducive to professional foster care provision in this country.

It needs to be acknowledged that there are resource issues for government administrations as well, and that foster care is but one of many responsibilities for departmental officers to handle. The low priority accorded foster care by some officers, can be seen though, to be a root cause of many of the criticisms levelled at government agencies by foster carers. The Community Services Commission (2000) has concluded that *the failure to quarantine substitute care* is a significant factor in the poor state of foster care throughout Australia.

While there may be a good case to be made for saying that government workers and administrators are under significant internal pressures, the conclusion has to be drawn that the onus is on government to address the issues of building bridges – if only because the care of children is ultimately a responsibility vested in government by the community at large.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1.1

That a National approach on foster care including Indigenous and kinship care be developed as a cooperative venture by the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments and peak community organisations directly involved in foster care .

RECOMMENDATION 1.2

That National and State/Territory Governments work with and involve the State and National Associations of foster carers and help fund their support.

RECOMMENDATION 1.3

That all governments and non-government organisations commit to working together to present the community with a contemporary view of foster care to increase community support and recognition.

RECOMMENDATION 2.1

That the Commonwealth and State/Territories initiate a national approach for the recruitment, training and accreditation of foster carers with a national accreditation of foster carers including those providing kinship care.

RECOMMENDATION 2.2

That the Commonwealth and States/Territories establish a policy on statistical recording of information pertinent to foster care and initiate a national collection process.

RECOMMENDATION 2.3

That the Commonwealth and States/Territories address the issues of providing full costs of foster care so that the combination of state and commonwealth support is sufficient to fully recompense foster carers in all aspects of providing foster care to meet the needs of the children.

RECOMMENDATION 2.4

That the Commonwealth and States/Territories develop ways to support foster carers to reduce instances of allegations and develop processes for handling allegations against foster carers including the national collection of statistics related to allegations.

RECOMMENDATION 3.1

That the Commonwealth and States/Territories prepare a set of standards to apply specifically to foster care to replace the current national baseline out-of-home care standards.

RECOMMENDATION 3.2

That a tiered national program evaluation of foster care provision be undertaken to provide accountability to the Australian community of the resources committed to foster care.

RECOMMENDATION 3.3

That governments commission and/or fund appropriate research into foster care as a means of further development of foster care in Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 4.1

That the Commonwealth host a round table for representatives of peak national bodies predominantly involved in foster care along with senior Commonwealth and State/Territories representatives to discuss the recommendations of this report and to plan for action to occur.