

Summary Report 4

Workforce Issues and Resources for Early Intervention

Child and Family Focus SA Forum

**“Improving Family Wellbeing and Child Protection:
What are our priorities for the next four years in SA?”**

Purpose of this summary report.

This is the final summary report on issues discussed at the CAFFSA Forum held on 6 May 2022. It was attended by 68 participants from 28 organisations.

Summary Report 1 provided an overview of all issues discussed and participant feedback.

Summary Report 2 provided more information about issues raised by First Nations speakers and participants.

Summary Report 3 provided more information about the desire for joint advocacy for positive reforms; getting together regularly as a sector to focus on solutions and hear about each other’s work; and the value of opportunities to listen directly to everyone in the sector, including staff from the Department of Child Protection and children and young people who have been in care.

Summary Report 4 (this report) is providing more information about workforce issues, the need to resource early intervention and the call to raise the age of leaving care raised at the Forum.

Overview

The following is an extract from the first summary report of the Forum that have already been circulated to CAFFSA members relating to workforce issues, early intervention and the call to raise the age of children leaving care.

Workforce development is the fundamental priority, including Foster Carer and Kinship Carer recruitment, engagement, training and support.

Every recommendation for positive improvement in the child protection and family welfare system that we discussed at the Forum will only be possible if we have the right workforce and the right culture. There is no greater priority than the development of an effective workforce plan for the attraction, retention, professional development and supportive supervision of our people.

The key message from Fiona Endacott, CEO, Connecting Foster and Kinship Carers South Australia is the need to embed the full spirit of the South Australian Statement of Commitment with Foster and Kinship Carers into the culture of all sector agencies. Essentially, this means that foster and kinship carers are informed, supported, consulted, valued and respected.

Fiona Endacott, CEO, Connecting Foster and Kinship Carers SA:

<https://youtu.be/01fwUZq2t3E>

Duration: 8 minutes.

The need to recommit to breaking down silos between all the government and non-government organisations that play a role in child protection and family welfare was a recurring theme. The Victorian speaker, Deb Tsorbaris highlighted the significant legislative reforms in that state to foster the all-important information sharing that so many inquiries and Royal Commissions have emphasised is essential to save the lives of children.

“Child Protection Workforce – planning, training, sustainability and improvement of Aboriginal Controlled Organisations. Need trained and resourced DCP workforce and avoid using recruitment agencies to contract untrained care workforce.” Forum Participant.

“Create a closer collaboration within the Family and Domestic Violence sector as there is so much overlap in our work.”

“Adequate support, professional development, training and remuneration for workers, carers and organisations working in this space. Particularly for workers who are expected to work outside of 9 to 5 in order to be effective in regards to relationship building with clients and families.” Forum Participant.

“We must understand how trauma and complexity intersect in the families we work with. We are so siloed, how can we understand complexity? We need to be more holistic.” Forum Participant.

“Increased workforce development to keep staff in their roles. Understanding that meaningful change occurs in the context of safe, supported relationships. So for client outcomes, staff retention is key.” Forum Participant.

“Increasing the safety and stability for children in care. Grow family-based care. Reinvigorate Foster Care recruitment and retention strategies, including reviewing remuneration.” Forum Participant

"Expansion and adequate funding of programs that we know work. Reduction in constant recommissioning, fighting for funding and grant applications. Short contracts result in the loss of good staff and contribute to instability for the kids." Forum Participant.

Resourcing early intervention, prevention and keeping families together

Resourcing for early intervention was a primary concern of everyone at the Forum. Speakers discussed services that are achieving good results and there was a universal desire to see more resources invested in early intervention and prevention. A common demand, including from First Nations speakers, was the need for more time to be given to efforts to support families and build the capacity for positive change, before children are removed for long periods of time.

"Invest in prevention and early intervention strategies, in particular keeping Aboriginal families together. Expand Family Group Conferencing to include early, middle and end stages of care." Forum Participant.

Increasing the age when a young person leaves care and improving the availability of on-going support.

There was strong support for increasing the age at which a young person leaves care. There was also strong support for continuing to improve the provision of "wrap around services" and networks of support in the lead up to leaving care and in the months and years that follow. Increases in workforce and resources are necessary to deliver these reforms.

"We need to improve the experience of young people leaving care. Better planning, support, resources extending to 21." Forum Participant.

"Increase the age for remaining in care to 21 years and ensure wrap-around services are in place for each young person." Forum Participant.

"Push for children's age to 21 re legislative care. But build into this a clear pathway for kids. How to get electricity on, how to book appointments. Bigger stuff like self-care. Otherwise 21 becomes the new 18 and young people are no better off." Forum Participant.

"Raise leaving care age to 21-25 years. Decrease the risk of homelessness. More natural experience for young person. Support transition to independent living. Ongoing support for young person." Forum Participant

Further information about Workforce issues discussed at the Forum.

Working with Foster Carers

Amalie Mannik, Manager Foster Care, Centacare Catholic Family Services

Recruiting, assessing, training, supporting and retaining Foster Carers is critical for CAFFSA members. It is vital we do this well, if we are to offer the best possible life for children and young people for whom Foster Care is considered the best option.

Amalie Mannik outlined the aspects of her team's work at Centacare Catholic Family Services that she felt delivered benefits to Foster Carers and the children in their care.

Amalie Mannik's remarks addressed three key areas.

Firstly, her team has a variety of systems in place to actively engage and consult Foster Carers and involve them in shaping all aspects of the program.

Secondly, she hopes that CAFFSA agencies will be able to co-design initiatives and reforms in partnership with the Department of Child Protection and have the recommendations of agencies valued. She applauded the values and content of the DCP Practice Approach and its emphasis on partnership. However, she expressed concern that when this true partnership fails to materialise, it could compound trauma for children and young people, which also has a "ripple effect" impact on carers.

Thirdly, the value of regular Care Team Meetings, being open and respectful of each other and of each other's perspectives. She felt key professional practices contributed to a Foster Care program working well. These included actively tracking the progress of a child to ensure decisions continue to be child-led and the resourcing of supervision and reflective practice. A co-ordinated and collaborative approach assists in the retention of carers and workers alike.

The Foster Care team at Centacare Foster Care strive to fulfill the full spirit of the South Australian Statement of Commitment with Foster and Kinship Carers, as described by Fiona Endacott, CEO of Connecting Foster and Kinship Carers SA, in the video referred to earlier.

The Statement of Commitment can be found here:

https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/209287/statement-of-commitment.pdf

Some of the elements of the Foster Care team's work that Amalie Mannik described at the Forum are as follows:

Carer Consultations and Care Team Meetings

"We can see the Statement of Commitment living through every facet and aspect in our program. It is reflected in our Carer Consultations, where carers have the ability to have input into the notes that both parties sign and the carers have a record. The Foster Carers attend monthly Care Team meetings where we have Birth Parents present as well. They are part of the Care Team. This is a platform for carers to communicate the day-to-day needs of children because they are best placed to talk to that.

Trauma-Informed Framework and Trauma-Responsive Framework

"The other thing is the therapeutic framework that we have in our program. We train our staff in our therapeutic framework so they can develop positive relationships and rapport with carers. They work with some long-standing relationships, some since the program has been established, and others are newer, depending on staff recruitment and retention. Our work is not only Trauma-Informed, it is a Trauma-Responsive Framework as well.

Narrative Exposure Therapy

"Trauma shouldn't be the elephant in the room that no one talks about. We can't protect children from their own trauma stories. So we have Narrative Exposure Therapy that all of our care support practitioners are trained in. And they do this with carers in the home, for example, to deal with really intense issues of grief and loss, for both short-term placements and reunification. We acknowledge the trauma and challenges that go with that."

Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) is described in Centacare's Foster Care Program Training Policy as follows: "An individual therapeutic, trauma responsive therapy, which addresses trauma, grief and loss experiences from the placement and assists carers to resolve these. NET is utilised between specialist reunification placements, helping carers to place challenges in the past and best prepare them to move forwards with another placement."

Here is a definition of Narrative Exposure Therapy from the American Psychological Association 2022: "This treatment helps individuals establish a coherent life narrative to contextualize traumatic experience. Key elements of the therapist's behaviour include compassionate understanding, active listening, therapeutic alliance and unequivocal positive regard."

Carer Reference Group and Carers' Newsletter

"I think the most exciting part of the program, in terms of seeing the Statement of Commitment reflected in the program, is our Carer Reference Group. We meet on a quarterly basis. It's a really innovative space where we have a cross section of

different types of carers that sit with myself and the senior staff of the program. We have really robust conversations where the Foster Carers are able to feed into processes that affect them. We can change the program and identify gaps in the program as well. One of the first things that came out from the Carer Reference Group, when it was established, was the Carers' Newsletter. It's a platform for carers and it is co-designed and co-led by them. The content is continually shaped and created by carers as well. That's been a great initiative and we get good feedback about that."

Voice of the Child

How is the voice of the child brought into these conversations?

"That's a good question. For some of our older children this has occurred within the carer's home and the young person has been there, around the table, feeding into decision making. When children are younger, that is where it gets a little bit more tricky.

"This is where the Care Team Meetings can sometimes become a bit contentious. We can have a group of professionals around the table, who all think they've got the best interests of the child at heart, and there can be conflicting views on that. For example, we've got the social worker who will visit and they've developed their understanding of what they think is best. We've got the carer, who's hearing the child's voice on a daily basis, and they've got their views. And then you've got us, as a support agency. We are there supporting the carer through that and giving them a platform in those meetings and nurturing their confidence to speak up a lot of the time. Quite often we chair these meetings. So we have a senior person in our program who chairs these meetings. We do our best to ensure all are heard, including the child, and a way forward is found.

Working relationship with the Department of Child Protection

What are your key concerns about the working relationship with the Department of Child Protection and in what way does the DCP Practice Approach offer a way forward?

DCP Practice Approach: Summary Guide:

https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/126124/dcp-practice-approach-summary-guide.pdf

DCP Practice Principles:

https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/126126/dcp-practice-principles.pdf

Co-design and Collaboration with Department of Child Protection

"We've been talking about co-design and collaboration in what we've established with our Carer Reference Group in our Foster Care program. I would absolutely love to see co-design and collaboration consistently established between agencies and the department. I would love to see the recommendations and assessments of agencies valued as well.

DCP Practice Approach

"I have seen consultation and there is collaboration in some areas. But I think we need to build on it. It is there in the DCP Practice Approach. I was really excited when that was rolling out. I was part of the consultation for that and I have the DCP Practice Approach on my mouse pad, which I see every day at work. There are so many different offices with different cultures. Quite often I'll look at my mouse pad and think the answers are there. We don't need to reinvent the wheel. People have already done the work there. In terms of consultation with agencies, that's one of the practice principles in the framework.

(See link above to [DCP Practice Approach: Summary Guide](#) page six)

"The core in the middle is the safety of children and young people. That starts with recruiting more carers. Making sure they are in safe households that are nurturing at the core of everything and can provide stability. In order for practitioners to notice people, pay attention, stay and not leave, we need time and regular supervision for staff. It is an emotive space. We don't want to burn through people and have issues of vicarious trauma.

"You've got your trauma lens where you've got your frameworks with trauma-informed and trauma-responsive care. If your professional development is in place, your team members are not seeking different employment because they can see a pathway where they are. Accountability is essential in the way we work together. Continuous improvement is about not getting stagnant and making sure we are always evolving. This comes from collaborative approaches as well, because the only way you evolve is through feedback.

"I would love to see how this DCP Practice Approach is being implemented across the offices to get a continuity in practice priorities and how we can build relationships with people. These principles should be seen across the board in transition planning, in care team meetings, in pre-placement meetings. It should be what informs all of us jointly."

Framework Implementation and Measurement Tools

"I think we all get stuck in the crisis sometimes. So I would really like to find a way to put implementation of these frameworks at the forefront. And equally, we need

measurement tools to be able to have evidence-based knowledge that what we're doing is really making a difference and things are improving."

End of comments from Amalie Mannik, Manager Foster Care, Centacare Catholic Family Services.

Improving Support for Foster and Kinship Carers Recommendations from a range of speakers and participants.

The Statement of Commitment needs to be consistently applied and agencies need to be accountable, both internally and externally.

Increasing the stability of the professional staff in the lives of carers is essential. It takes time to develop a trusting relationship. If we support and engage with carers and develop trusting relationships, we can nurture a culture in which it is ok to make mistakes and ask for help. Good communication with carers and supervision require stability and the development of trust with professional staff.

Kinship Carers need support workers.

Trauma-Informed training should be provided to Foster and Kinship Carers before they start and it should be on-going.

The Annual Carer Review is an opportunity to ask carers what professional development they need. We need to provide carers with options for training that is available.

First Nations Children and Carers.

Please note: Summary Report 2: First Nations Children, Young People and Families provides more detail on recommendations from the Forum.

We need to promote First Nations cultural safety and cultural identity.
"A child should not come into care with culture and leave without it."

We need to employ First Nations people in member organisations to promote cultural safety and cultural identity among families, children and young people receiving services

We need more First Nations Foster Families. This is the priority. However, when non-Aboriginal Foster Carers are working well with our kids, we need to offer more training and support on cultural matters and cultural safety.

We need a radical change in decision-making in South Australia to reduce the number of children in care. Our numbers are rising compared to other states. If the number of people with cancer was rising as rapidly as the number of children going into care, action would be taken.

Decision-making needs to be given back to families, children and community. We need Family Group Conferencing at every level of the child protection system.

We need Family Group Conferencing when children are exiting care too. We need to bring together the family, the foster carers, the services. We need to work out our wrap-around services and who is going to do these things when the child leaves care so the child is fully supported.

More resources need to be directed towards reunification and support services to get more children and young people back home safely.

We need a stronger focus on the voices of key people in the young person's life. We need to listen to the young person's view on their family and where they want to live, particularly Aboriginal people. Ensure face-to-face visits happen regularly. Lower caseloads. Allow a greater focus on support and relationships. Consider a role for the private sector to take on case management.

Workforce Funding and Workforce Support.

Funding

Australian Council of Social Service Sector Survey 2022

<https://www.acoss.org.au/australias-community-sector-survey-2022/>

The calls for more funding made by speakers and participants at the Forum are supported by the latest survey data from the Australian Council for Social Service released this year. Here is an excerpt from this report dealing with Workforce Issues.

“Workforce Issues”

“The ACSS data reveals the enormous pressure and strain that community sector workers were under in 2021. One major practical challenge included providing both remote and face-to-face services to meet increasing need in the community. Employment challenges have included job insecurity, high workload and pay rates that do not reflect the value of their work. Of significant concern, the data shows that community sector workers and leaders are offsetting funding shortfalls by performing large amounts of unpaid work. **Unpaid work** As reported previously[1], frontline workers have been particularly stretched in the pandemic. To compensate for insufficient and short-term public funding challenges, it has been the sector's

high level of commitment, namely staff contributing additional, unpaid hours that has made it possible to address rising community need. A total of 22% of participants reported that they had seen increases in unpaid overtime in their organisation during 2021. Participants noted the way their operational environment continued to be predicated on unpaid work.”

The following is an excerpt from the Executive Summary of the ACOSS report highlighting the broad economic and social context of our clients and workforce.

“Poverty and hardship remain entrenched

Survey participants were greatly concerned about growing social and economic disadvantage. Housing insecurity, mental health challenges, and difficulties experienced by children and families came through strongly in survey results as persistent problems, in particular for groups with disability and those from non-English speaking backgrounds. These problems were widespread, affecting jurisdictions with lower COVID-19 case numbers as well as the more populous states with higher infections and longer lockdowns.

Funding shortages are acute

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed governments’ chronic under-investment in the community sector. After operating for years with insufficient funds, services have needed to meet rising levels of demand caused by COVID-19.¹ Most organisations report that the funding they receive falls well short of what is required, which in turn affects their operations. When asked to rate their organisation’s main funding source:

- Only a minority of leaders reported that funding had adequately supported their organisation to cope with the pandemic: 27% said that funding supported the organisation to develop good models of remote service delivery, and just over a third (35%) felt funding had appropriately supported them to address the emergencies confronting their communities (including COVID and environmental disasters such as fires and floods). Only 20% said it covers the full costs of service delivery.
- Only 17% said it recognises increasing wage costs.
- Only 14% said it properly recognises their overheads.
- Only 14% reported that indexation arrangements for their main funding source are adequate.”

(Source: Australian Council of Social Service Sector Survey 2022)

Workforce Support, Retention and Recruitment.

A critical workforce issue is understanding how to support, develop and retain the current good staff and carers we have, as well as attracting new staff and carers to the sector. This is especially hard in the face of media coverage of tragedies and a national workforce shortage.

CAFFSA members may find value in a future Forum that invited speakers from member organisations to outline how they are approaching these challenges, what is working well and what lessons they have learnt. Opportunities for small group discussion would facilitate the sharing of experience and mutual support.

The Sanctuary Model was recommended by a participant in the feedback sheets at the Forum. A range of agencies nationally and internationally are utilising this approach.

“The Sanctuary Model is an evidence-supported care model that supports people who work in stressful human services and care delivery environments. The Model supports staff to provide mindful, safe and therapeutic practice in order to achieve positive growth and change for everyone in our Anglicare community. Sanctuary is an ‘everybody model’: it benefits staff and clients alike by supporting the development of coping skills and resilience, in the face of stress and adversity. Sanctuary encourages connectedness and inclusiveness by acknowledging our past, working from the present and guiding our future. The Sanctuary Model embeds trauma-informed responses into the heart of our practice; it facilitates a shared understanding through a common language in a democratic way.”

The Sanctuary Model <https://www.anglicare.com.au/about-us/sanctuary/>

Sanctuary Model <https://www.mackillopinstitute.org.au/programs/sanctuary>

END

Julie McCrossin AM, Forum Facilitator

19 August 2022.