**NSW Department of
Community Services**

OUT-OF-HOME CARE SERVICE MODEL

GENERAL FOSTER CARE

This service model has been developed by the NSW Department of Community Services in consultation with the non government sector. The paper describes the key elements of a general foster care service which are considered to reflect best practice. As such, the service model is not designed to be prescriptive but should be used as a guide to current service development priorities.

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Summary

In NSW demand for foster care generally outstrips supply. Growth of quality general foster care is a priority for the out-of-home care service system.

This paper outlines the elements of effective foster care services. These include:

- *Case management support to children and young people including case planning based on comprehensive assessment and review.*
- *Effective recruitment, screening, assessment and training of foster carers.*
- *Access to wraparound supports such as 24 hour on call crisis support, respite, behaviour management, counselling, contact and other specialist assistance.*

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the key components of a quality foster care service system in NSW. This is one of a number of policy reforms being undertaken by DoCS and non-government stakeholders to build a more effective service system that can flexibly respond to changes in demand. The policy directions and service components identified are based on the principles and provisions of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* (the Act) relating to out-of-home care, and a thorough review of existing research and evidence. The paper should not be viewed as a definitive reflection of service specifications but be used as a guide to key service elements, current service system priorities and good practice.

2. Current situation

The steady growth of quality general foster care is a key priority for NSW, to ensure DoCS can effectively fulfil its obligations and provide better outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care.

At present, demand for foster care placements exceeds supply, with particular deficits in emergency as well as long term placements. Sibling groups, children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal children present particular placement challenges.

3. Research

The main research resources relied on to develop this model are listed in the research bibliography at the end of this paper.

4. Definition of foster care

For the purposes of this model, general foster care is defined as care for children and young people aged 0-17 years which is provided on a short or long term basis by authorised carers in their own homes, or in a home owned or rented by an agency, who are reimbursed for expenses.[1] It does not include voluntary foster care other than that which has been arranged

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[1] Combines US Department of Health & Human Services and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare definitions.

by the Director-General under Section 151 of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection Act) 1998.

An authorised carer is a single person or couple authorised as a foster or relative/kinship carer by a designated agency, or the principal officer of a designated agency, or any person authorised according to the regulations[2]. In NSW increasing numbers of relative and kinship carers are providing foster care to children and young people who are in the care of the Director-General or under the parental responsibility of the Minister.[3]

5. Foster care placement types

Available research and examples of best practice indicate that a range of foster care placement types and individually tailored support services are required to address the individual needs of children and young people in care and to achieve case plan goals of family restoration or permanent, stable placements. Placement types include short and long term care, permanent care and respite care.

6. Aims of foster care services

Foster care services should aim to:

- provide safe, stable and suitable home-based placements for children and young people for whom foster care represents the most appropriate placement option for meeting their day-to-day care and support needs;

- recruit, assess, train and support a range of suitable carers so that they become integral members of the casework team involved in developing and implementing the child or young person's case plan; and

- include effective case management to ensure that children, young people, families and carers receive integrated and coordinated quality services.

7. Outcomes of foster care services

The expected outcomes of foster care services include:

- recruitment of an adequately trained and supported pool of authorised carers able to competently provide care for children and young people;

- retention of carers to minimise placement disruption and provide a range of placement options;

- matching children and young people with carers who are competent to meet their needs and who are culturally and linguistically appropriate;

- recruitment of an adequately trained and supported pool of authorised carers able to competently meet the cultural and linguistic needs of children and young people;

- a case planning process in which social, emotional, educational and health domains of children and young people are addressed;

- provision of care and support that meets the needs of children and young people;

- achievement of case plan goals through a coordinated, multi-disciplinary case planning and case management process;

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[2] Section 137(1) of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act* 1998
[3] Section 135 (2) of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act* 1998

- improvement in placement stability through provision of effective and timely support to placements and the additional services that may be required by children, young people and foster carers;

- participation of the child, young person, their family, significant others and carers in decision-making; and

- efficient management and delivery of services.

8. Key components of foster care services

8.1 Management and staffing

Services are responsible for recruiting appropriate skilled and experienced staff and for providing effective staff management and supervision that facilitate stable placements to ensure the safety and well being of children and young people in their care.

8.2 Foster carer recruitment, training, retention and support

Recruitment of carers

Foster care services will:

- coordinate general community awareness-raising activities with local targeted recruitment campaigns (including working with DoCS where appropriate);

- gain a thorough knowledge of local demand and supply to better target recruitment campaigns;

- target couples or individuals with the competencies required to effectively manage children and young people;

- target carers from relevant backgrounds and with competencies to meet the diverse needs of children and young people requiring placement. Diversity of backgrounds and competencies should include those relevant to children of Indigenous and diverse cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds. Specific strategies may need to be developed to recruit these carers;

- meet the identified number of placements within the geographical areas as determined by the Service Agreement and Specifications;

- support current carers to be active in positive 'word-of-mouth' recruitment;

- be aware of the skills and competencies required and be able to access training packages so that caseworkers develop the necessary skills to undertake recruitment activities; and

- have efficient processes in place so that prospective carers are responded to in a timely and professional manner.

Assessment and authorisation of carers

Foster care services will:

- undertake thorough assessments of prospective foster carers utilising an assessment format such as the *Step by Step*[4] assessment package that focuses on carers' competencies; assessment packages should be adapted for use with prospective carers from Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds;

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[4] Hayden, P. & Mulroney, L. (2003) *Step by Step – A competency based resource for assessing potential foster carers.* Produced by the Centre for Community Welfare Training as a project of the Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies

- ensure that prospective carers undergo full employment screening under Part 7 of the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998* prior to authorisation[5]; and

- authorise foster carers in accordance with the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* and the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Regulation 2000.*

Training of carers

Foster care services will:

- assess and meet ongoing training needs of carers;

- train foster carers in accordance with the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Regulation 2000*[6];

- conduct entry level training based on recognised training packages such as the *Shared Stories, Shared Lives* training package for prospective foster carers[7], including packages specifically designed for use with prospective carers from Indigenous and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds;

- provide carers with information and training about the guidelines relating to abuse in care allegations;

- provide training on culturally appropriate care and cross cultural communication for children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds and Indigenous children and young people; and

- provide mandatory ongoing training for foster carers to consolidate their knowledge, build on their skills, promote their well being and to address identified issues.

Establish placements

Foster care services will:

- develop and implement intake and assessment processes that facilitate the matching of children and young people with suitable carers, and promote the successful establishment of the placement.

Support and supervision of carers

Foster care services will:

- provide caseworker support for carers which varies in regularity according to individual need and placement type, and which may take the form of phone contact, personal visits and e-mails.

- provide caseworker contact that is responsive to issues and concerns that arise throughout the duration of the placement;

- provide additional support and services to carers under stress due to, for example, changes in circumstances, health or personal problems, cultural needs or issues, difficulties managing particular behaviours, external events, influences or pressures negatively impacting upon the child, young person or household;

- provide or arrange support to carers through the process that occurs following abuse in care allegations, at the same time ensuring the well-being of the child or young person;

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[5] Section 20(3)(c) of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Regulation* 2000
[6] Division, section 20((3)(b) of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Regulation* 2000
[7] Hayden, P., Mulroney, L. & Barnes, M. (2000) *Shared Stories, Shared Lives*

- arrange or provide specialist support and advice to carers to assist them in their role (e.g. support from a psychologist, speech pathologist, medical specialist or case worker with language or cultural skills);

- encourage carers to develop and participate in peer support/network groups;

- assess the need for carers to receive regular planned respite care as stipulated in the case plan;

- regularly conduct reviews of carers strengths and needs particularly when major changes affect the household such as the birth of a child to the foster parents, separation or death of a foster parent, or traumatic periods for the child or young person such as starting school or moving into adolescence; and

- monitor foster carers' compliance with the *Code of Conduct for Authorised Carers[8]*.

8.3 Case management and casework

Foster care services are responsible for providing case management functions and undertaking casework tasks in accordance with the case plan, relevant standards and policies, the *Children and Young Persons' (Care and Protection) Act* and *Regulations* and their Service Agreement and Specifications.

Case management

Case management is the process of assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring and review. Case management aims to strengthen outcomes for both families and children and young people through integrated and coordinated service delivery. [9]

Casework

Casework is the practical day to day intervention with children, young people, their carers and families including implementation of the case plan, coordination of services and supports, and monitoring.

Foster care services will:

- work in collaboration with other government agencies, relevant professionals, carers, children, young people, families and appropriate cultural and community representatives to ensure a thorough needs assessment is undertaken and all relevant parties are involved in case planning;

- participate in the case planning process and implement the case plan;

- coordinate services to best meet the developmental, health, educational, social and behavioural needs of children and young people in foster care and assist them in developing their full potential to lead fulfilled, responsible and independent lives;

- regularly monitor placements and review case plans to ensure that plans remain relevant to the child or young person's best interests (in accordance with the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998[10]*);

- undertake casework and supervision practices with children, young people, families and carers that aim to reduce the number of unplanned placement changes;

- ensure all placement related processes are planned and structured to facilitate a smooth transition from one placement to another and to support children, young people, families and carers;

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[8] Schedule 2, *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Regulation* 2000
[9] DoCS Case Management Policy 2006
[10] Chapter 8, Part 2, s.150 (1) – (4) of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act* 1998 requires that placements be reviewed by the designated agency supervising the placement of the child or young person in out-of-home care. The review is to be undertaken for children and young persons in out-of-home care effected by a Children's Court order within timeframes specified by s150(2) (a) and (b) of the Act and/or when there are changes to the circumstances of the placement (s.150 (2) (c) and (d) of the Act).

- plan for and provide additional supports and services during critical transition stages. Such stages include the period immediately before or following a placement change, placement disruption, contact with birth families, return home, or move to independence, children entering adolescence and major life events in foster carer's family;

- work collaboratively with other agencies to ensure children and young people receive the services and supports required to meet their needs while in care;

- facilitate access to primary and preventative health care services for each child and young person;

- ensure a child or young person's educational needs are met, either through mainstream schooling or alternative educational programs as appropriate and necessary to meet the needs and circumstances of the child or young person;

- encourage children and young people to be actively involved in community activities. This may include school, recreational, sporting, religious and cultural activities as well as any special interests;

- implement the cultural placement principles of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998.* This includes the principles relating to culture, language, religion and other components of diversity, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander principles of self-determination, participation and placement[11];

- actively promote and support children and young people in maintaining and developing important and significant relationships, including sibling relationships and friendships, while they are in foster care[12];

- facilitate contact arrangements with family members, siblings and other significant people as outlined in the case plan in order to promote the maintenance of identity, culture and religion and to meet the identified needs of children and young people;

- undertake activities that support the child or young person in maintaining their identity through, for example, regular life story work;

- maintain comprehensive care records and ensure the content accurately reflects the reasons why the child or young person entered into care and their life history and achievements during their period in care ;

- provide timely and relevant services and support to care leavers moving back home to prevent re-entry into care; and

- arrange or provide timely and appropriate aftercare services for young people living independently.

8.4 Participation of children, young people, families and carers

Foster care services will:

- conduct genuine, ongoing consultation and facilitate participation of children, young people, and their families in the making of decisions that affect them;

- provide children, young people and their families with information (in a manner and language that they can understand) which facilitates their participation; and

- conduct genuine, ongoing consultation and facilitate participation of carers in decision-making processes.

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[11] Sections 9 (c), 9 (e) 11,12, and 13 of the *Children and Young Person's (Care and Protection) Act* 1998

[12] Where consistent with the case plan, and will not damage permanent attachments siblings should be placed together – see DoCS Sibling Policy.

8.5 Promoting the rights of children, young people and families

Foster care services will:

- inform children, young people, their families and foster carers of their rights (in a manner which is appropriate to their age, developmental capacity and cultural and linguistic background). This includes information about their rights under the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* and information about complaint and appeals processes;

- provide all children and young people with the *Charter of Rights* and ensure the agency advances and complies with the Charter;

- ensure that the privacy of children, young people and their families is respected, confidentiality is maintained and information is collected and exchanged in accordance with the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*; and

- have policies and procedures in place to appropriately process complaints and appeals by children, young people and their families within clearly stated timeframes.

APPENDIX: Research bibliography

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