

## 2. INTRODUCTION

All Australian jurisdictions have responsibility, under different legislative frameworks, to care for and protect children at risk of significant harm. Foster care is a vital option for children and young people who cannot live safely at home with their parents.

Today, however, the foster system is facing catastrophe, with more foster parents leaving the system than there are new people volunteering. At the same time, demand is increasing, with the number of Australian children in out-of-home care increasing threefold between 1990 and 2010 to 36 thousand.<sup>3</sup> Data for 30 June 2011 indicated that 37,648 children were in out-of-home care<sup>4</sup> across Australia.

As of June 2012, there were 6,702 children in care in Victoria, an increase of 9 per cent on the previous year. Overall, there was a 40 per cent increase in the number of children placed in out of home care in Victoria from 1997-2012.<sup>5</sup> In 2011, 37 per cent of children were in foster care; 42 per cent were in relative/kin care; 12 per cent were in 'other' home-based care; and 9 per cent were in residential care.

Meanwhile, as of 30 June 2011, there were an estimated 1,574 Victorian foster parent households who had a placement during the year; 226 foster parents commenced fostering whilst 291 foster parents exited foster care in 2010-11.<sup>6</sup> Over the past two years, the decline in numbers is even more significant, with 806 households exiting foster care compared with 517 commencing.<sup>7</sup>

*Unless radical changes are made, more foster parents will continue to leave the system than enter. This problem needs to be fixed, if we are to protect the most vulnerable children in our community.*

This briefing paper was developed to assist the deliberations of the Inquiry into *Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children*. The paper highlights the need to establish a more professionalised foster care system, and outlines a model for funding that integrates clinical assessment, therapeutic support, complexity of needs, the true cost of raising a child, and agency costs. The paper also describes what is required to develop a sustainable, professionalised, foster care system with the capacity to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people.

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<sup>3</sup> Higgins, 2011

<sup>4</sup> OOH; AIHW, 2012

<sup>5</sup> AIHW, 1997, 2011, 2012

<sup>6</sup> AIHW, 2012

<sup>7</sup> Cummins et al., 2012: lxvii

The first section of the paper (1.1) discusses the background to foster care in Australia, factors associated with the current crisis in fostering (1.2) and why a new foster care model is needed.

In particular, we look at how a professionalised model of foster care, as adopted in many other countries, could help improve outcomes for children in out of home care (OOHC). In such a model, foster parents are remunerated with both a Fostering Allowance to meet a child's costs and a Foster Parent Fee or salary to reward the foster parent. It is suggested by Berry Street that it is time that Australian jurisdictions debated and discussed such a model with the OOHC sector.

Section 2 of the paper outlines the new Berry Street integrated model for foster care. The model has four interlinked components:

1. Foster Parent Recruitment, Training and Assessment
2. Placement Support
3. Foster Parent Network Support
4. Financial Resources.

*The Berry Street Foster Care Integrated Model*, as presented in this paper, considers both the costs of caring and the concept of a professional approach to foster care. Underpinning the new model is an improved model of extended support for the foster parent family and foster parent training. Berry Street is currently developing a training framework, and this is outlined in section 4.1.

This model demonstrates the need for partnerships to provide the best professionalised approach to providing care. Whilst any one agency could, in principle, provide all activities in each of the four components, in reality there are a number of agencies that could provide individual activities, thereby operating under a partnership approach to service delivery

Throughout the development of this model, special attention was given to the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020* and the *National Standards for Out of Home Care* and how the *Framework* and *Standards* relate to a more professional approach to fostering. Clear connections can be made between in-care experiences and outcomes, and how a professional model of fostering, involving a therapeutic approach, could enhance the skills of foster parents, enabling them to work more effectively with children and young people.