



Comment on
Out of Home Care Strategy
Issues Paper

September 2013

About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges Canberra has been built on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We pay respects to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage and low-income citizens of the Territory.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS' vision is to live in a fair and equitable community that respects and values diversity and actively encourages collaborations that promote justice, equity and social inclusion.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS receives funding from the ACT Government - Community Services Directorate.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

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Introduction

ACTCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Out of Home Care Strategy Issues Paper ('the Issues Paper').

As the peak body for the community sector and individuals living with disadvantage in the ACT, ACTCOSS' comments will reflect those two interest groups. We note that organisations delivering out of home care (OOHC) services or advocacy for people involved in child protection services are also responding to the Issues Paper and so our submission will take the form of voicing our broader concerns. We have also developed extra questions under each 'focus area' in the Paper we think need to be asked in order to strengthen the overall analysis of issues and development of the Strategy.

Concerns

ACTCOSS' first concern with the Issues Paper is that it **lacks a broader perspective of the issues** involved in the care and protection system, specifically around the need for **early intervention and prevention**. Any strategy relating to out of home care should be focused on ensuring the reasons behind children's (and their families) involvement in the children protection system are addressed. Core to the strategy should be a commitment to reduce demand and the need for out of home care.

Our second concern with the Issues Paper is that the approach to the out of home care strategy appears to be very 'siloed'. We strongly believe that a **whole-of-government approach** is needed on children and young people in OOHC and the families at risk of entering the system, and that it should not just lie in the jurisdiction of Care and Protection. The issues underlying children and families' engagement in the child protection system are complex and include vulnerabilities across a number of domains. We believe other government agencies need to be involved in providing data, analysing issues and developing the Strategy, including Health, Housing, Justice and Community Safety, and Education and Training.

Our third concern is that the Issues Paper lacks focus on **groups who are particularly vulnerable to engagement in the care and protection system**. We know there are specific groups - including people with disability, people with mental illness, and people with alcohol and other drug problems - who are consistently over-represented across a number of systems. ACTCOSS believes a Strategy addressing out of home care needs to be designed around supporting those groups' needs as that is where the most impact will be made on safety and well-being of children and reducing the need for OOHC.

Finally, while we acknowledge the inclusion of a particular section on the voices of children and young people, we think there also needs to be a focus in the Issues Paper/strategy for the **voices of parents** who are involved in, or are at risk of entering, the out of home care system.

Current context

ACTCOSS commends the Community Services Directorate for including, under 'current context', where the Out of Home Care Strategy will sit within a wider strategic focus for the ACT Government. We particularly are pleased to note the inclusion of the *Social Compact* as we believe that it is vital the community sector work in collaboration with the ACT Government on the issue of child protection. However we believe it would be beneficial for the Issues Paper to clearly articulate how the principles of the *Social Compact* will be put into practice in the Strategy.

Focus Issue 1: How do we ensure the continuing success of kinship care?

Additional questions:

- What are the measures ACT Government takes on its own?
- What are the opportunities to use resources from the Commonwealth via the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*?
- What support and resources are or should be available to kinship carers from outside of OOHC system (for example primary health, child and adolescent mental health services, adult mental health services, carer services, education, trauma support services etc.)?
- What would be the outcomes of a public campaign that raises awareness about the advantages of kinship care?

Focus Issue 2: Engaging/recruiting foster carers

Additional questions:

- Are foster care skills and requirements different from other caring roles?
- Is there a need to change the financial support available to foster carers?
- What good practice from other jurisdictions (national and international) should we consider?
- What are the reasons for foster carers dropping out? What do we know about the reasons potential foster carers do not commit in the long term?
- What changes in the community and social structures may have contributed to difficulties experienced in recruiting and retaining foster carers? What actions would counteract these changes?
- What percentage of foster carers' recruitment is conducted by government institutions and what percentage by community organisations, and what can these figures tell us in terms of future roles?

Focus Issue 3: Professional foster care

Additional questions:

- What funds are required to train professional foster carers? Is there a cost-benefit analysis of this model?
- Is the current training in therapeutic knowledge and skills adequate?

Focus Issue 4: How do we hear the voices of children and young people?

Additional questions:

- How should we increase children and young people-initiated expressions of views?
- How do we build skills and competency in workers around listening to, and building the decision-making skills of, children and young people, especially children and young people with disability or language/culture differences?
- What evidence can the Directorate provide that the child/young person's view has been acted on?
- How is the use of Viewpoint going to help in improving the quality of OOHHC? Is this only for reporting purposes for the NFPAC? Will its findings be used to improve the capacity of and impact of work in the community sector as well?
- How do we hear from and respond to parents?

Focus Issue 5: How do we hear the voices of carers?

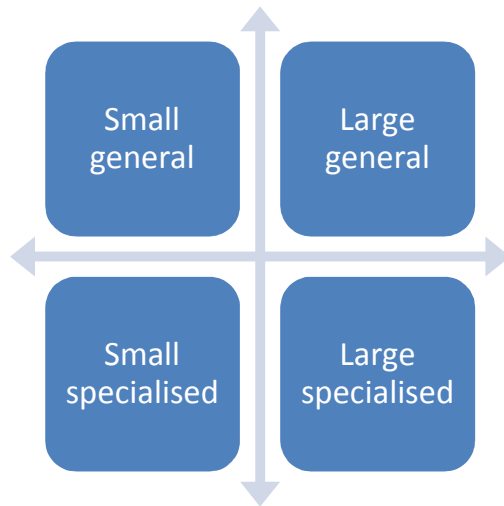
Additional questions:

- What is the role of service providers in facilitating communication with carers and representing them as well?
- What steps has the government taken to bring carers together to share their experiences and learn together (this is suggested in the context of government and not-for-profit working with different pools of carers)?
- What evidence can the Directorate provide that carers views have influenced changes in policy and practice?
- Has the Directorate completed action on all previous recommendations and consultation findings?
- What is out-of-scope for action?

Focus Issue 6: The role of agencies in providing out of home care services

Additional questions:

- In what context are small organisations not working/appropriate? Where is the evidence regarding outcomes and cost structures for organisations:



- What role is there for more finely tuned assessment and referral processes to match circumstances and model of response?
- Do carers overseen by government institutions operate within a different framework/set of requirements from those overseen by agencies?
- What kind of support is offered across departments for individuals, parents and carers in OOHC and how is that coordinated with community agencies that provide OOHC-specific services?

Focus Issue 7: A specific focus on the placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

Additional questions:

- What resources would be needed to establish an independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled child welfare organisation to deliver services and lead advocacy? What would be their Terms of Reference? Is there a model from another jurisdiction that could be used for guidance?

Focus Issue 8: The future of residential care

Additional questions:

- Could residential care settings be provided as “in-reach” to build family capability, safety and reduce placement in out of home care?
- What are the benefits of an integrated model of support services for children, especially young people in residential care settings?

Focus Issue 9: Transitioning young people from out of home care

Additional questions:

- What are the roles and responsibilities of government agencies beyond out of home care to support 18-25 year olds?
- What resources could be targeted to supporting those most at risk as parents and as citizens?

- What support is needed for birth families and for young people re-connecting with birth families?

Focus Issue 10: How can we encourage quality through accreditation and monitoring?

Additional questions:

- How to incorporate whole-of-government, whole-of-life monitoring of activity and outcomes?
- How to incorporate child, young person and carer views into the accreditation system?
- Is the NSW approach good practice, or are the national standards a higher threshold?