



FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service

SERVICE EVALUATION 2010

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promoting
the safety
and wellbeing
of children

Child Safety
Commissioner

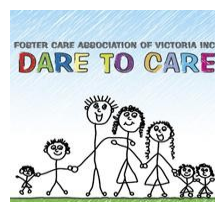


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	5
Background	8
Methodology	10
Results of Data Collected and Discussion	11
Section 1: Carer awareness of the Carer Information & Support Service	11
Section 2: Frequency of individual carer access to Carer Information & Support Service	12
Section 3: Service needs of carers contacting the Carer Information & Support Service	13
Section 4: Carer service expectations of the Carer Information & Support Service	14
Section 5: Response time to calls to the Carer Information & Support Service	17
Section 6: Follow up to carer enquiries by the Carer Information & Support Service	18
Section 7: Resolution of carer issues by the Carer Information & Support Service	19
Section 8: Information and support provided to carers by Carer Information & Support Service	20
Section 9: Carer Information & Support Service hours of operation	21
Section 10: Suggested improvements to the Carer Information & Support Service	21
Recommendations	23
Appendix	27
A. Interim Evaluation Report dated February 2010	28
B. Final Questionnaire	31
C. Record of Contact Sheet	33

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Foster Care Association of Victoria Inc (FCAV) is a non-government organisation providing support to foster carers and transitioned permanent carers. The Association is established for the public charitable purposes of advancing and promoting the care of children and young people who are fostered, or are in other forms of home based care, including encouraging contact and exchange of ideas and information between those persons involved in foster care.

The Post Placement Support Service (Vic) Inc (PPSS) is an early intervention support and training service which serves anyone who has a personal or professional connection with permanent care, adoption, long term foster care and kinship care. Particular emphasis is placed on offering services to children and young people (under 18 yrs) who have moved from one family to another, permanent parents/carers of children who were born to other parents, and the professionals who serve these individuals and families.

The FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service is available to all carers of children and young people living in home based care in Victoria. In addition, the Carer Information and Support Service is available to Community Service Organisations (CSOs) and government workers for information on issues impacting carers, or for the support of carers of children and young people living in home based care. In the financial year 2009/10, FCAV has committed \$30,000 and PPSS \$15,000, to employ a part-time coordinator who is supervised by, and accountable to, the Executive Officer of the FCAV.

Between July 2008 and December 2009, the FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service or 'CISS' (previously known as the FCAV/PPSS Carer Help Line) has collected and recorded data of more than 440 calls taken from foster carers, kinship carers, permanent carers, adoptive parents, workers, students and other professionals across the home based care sector.

In April 2009, the CISS Advisory Group was convened to oversee the running of the Carer Information and Support Service. The CISS Advisory Group consists of representatives from the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner, FCAV, PPSS, The Mirabel Foundation, The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Department of Human Services, Berry Street Victoria and Salvation Army Westcare.

With the Carer Information and Support Service having been operational for over 18 months, the CISS Advisory Group felt it was appropriate that a semi-independent evaluation of the service be conducted to establish what elements of the service were valuable and effective for carers, and what further service provisions would be helpful for carers of children in home based care. Some financial assistance was sought and received from the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner in order to conduct this evaluation.

Key findings from the Carer Information and Support Service evaluation are:

- Resources to be explored to extend the staffing capacity of the Carer Information and Support Service. The data coming out of the service around file handling times indicates the need for engagement of a support worker to assist in the more intensive support needs required by carers.
- The internet, friends and previous work in the sector were the most common sources of awareness about the service. Newsletters sent electronically, (including e-news) are effectively capturing participants who utilise the internet.
- Over half (54%) of participants surveyed had contacted the Carer Information and Support Service only once and required limited follow up, with a further 40% advising they had contacted the service more than once. The 6% that required active support, however, potentially utilise greater resources and a higher level of service response than the service is currently resourced to provide.
- Most carers' service expectations were met or exceeded. Prompt support and having information clarified were key to this experience.
- Where expectations were not met, broader systemic issues and avenues for change were key issues. It is important that the service promote more effectively what it can and cannot do for carers seeking advocacy and support.
- 40% of carers had their expectations exceeded in relation to follow up action. Carers who were not satisfied at all, had expectations of being notified of systemic changes, or of a faster response time.
- The majority of carers understood the capacity of the Carer Information and Support Service and the complexity of the home based care system, while a few carers felt there was a level of resignation amongst FCAV/Carer Information and Support Service staff, or an unwillingness to challenge the current system.
- Despite increasingly available electronic resources, the greatest preference for service provision is still through phone contact.
- 95% of carers agreed that Monday to Thursday 9am to 5pm and Friday 9am to 4pm were appropriate operating hours for the Carer Information and Support Service given the availability of an after hours on-call service through their CSO. Having said this, it is important to note that after hours on-call services are not available to most kinship carers, permanent carers or adoptive families, making the availability of the Carer Information and Support Service all the more valuable within the sector.

Key Recommendations

- Awareness of the service's availability to be increased across the home-based care sector through effective promotion and advertising of the service in all foster, kinship, permanent care and adoptive parenting networks.
- Staffing levels of the service to be considered as part of any further promotion of the service in terms of likely workload impact. It will be important to factor in the resulting increase in business to the service once the service has been effectively promoted to kinship carers.
- FCAV's existing service guidelines currently restrict their intensive support and advocacy role to that of only foster carers and permanent carers. As such, there is a need for a peak representative body for kinship carers to be established to enable advocacy and intensive support issues to be effectively followed up. The increased reliance on kinship care within Victoria for the placement of vulnerable children and young people, makes the development of such a peak body a matter of significant urgency.
- Development of an easy to access Carer Information & Support Service website.
- Work with regular users of the service to ensure they are connected with and identify their agencies as their first problem solving port of call.
- Identify appropriate resourcing of extended support for carers when needed, including advocacy and in-person support. This may need to be a separate part time position within FCAV, responsible for the intensive support and advocacy work identified through the service.
- Ensure carers have a realistic view of the assistance available through the service, thus ensuring both greater levels of carer satisfaction with the service and also, helping carers to understand and appreciate the influence and advocacy limitations that exist within the service.
- Establishment of carer support groups to extend social networks for carers. It is important these separately convened groups cater to the varied forms of home based care being foster care, kinship care, permanent care and adoption.
- Advocacy agenda to be identified and incorporated into both FCAV and PPSS work plans as appropriate, to ensure a consistent, targeted and informed approach is taken when advocating for change within the sector.

INTRODUCTION

State wide standardised training programs such as *Step by Step* and *Shared Stories Shared Lives*, ensure foster carers entering the home based care sector do so with significant training and insight into the impacts trauma and displacement can have on the children who come in to their care.

The steady increase in statutory kinship placements and informal relative care arrangements however is seeing a significant support need for relative carers who are not only new to the home based care sector, but are also grappling with the complexities of trauma related behaviours in the children they are caring for. In addition, permanent carers and adoptive families have their own particular support needs.

Whilst many carers caring for children in home based care are connected to and supported by Community Service Organisations (CSOs), history has shown that many carers seek the assistance and support of other carers when it comes to coping with the day to day trials and tribulations of caring for someone else's children.

The Foster Care Association of Victoria ('FCAV') and the Post Placement Support Service ('PPSS') have been aware of and responding to the need for carers to have an independent and informative support service for some years now, initially in an informal manner, and more recently in a structured, managed and staffed telephone support service. In 2008, FCAV and PPSS allocated resources for the employment of a part time service coordinator thus enabling the formalisation of the support service.

FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service – Statement of Purpose

The FCAV / PPSS Carer Information and Support Service, is a joint venture operated by the Foster Care Association of Victoria Inc and the Post Placement Support Service (Vic) Inc. The service operates in addition to the supports and advocacy offered to statutory foster, kinship and permanent carers through their funded care agencies, thus providing carers with an independent referral and assistance point should they need one. In addition, the FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service provides support, information, referral and advocacy services to non-statutory kinship carers and adoptive parents, ensuring these carers are supported in their roles as carers and parents of children and young people in Victoria.

FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service: Purpose

The FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service provides information, support, referrals and advocacy to all carers of children and young people living in home based care. Through support and advocacy for carers, we aim to represent the needs of children and young people living in home based care.

The FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service has four main aims:

- Provision of accurate and clear information via phone calls, both organisations' websites, newsletters and information sheets;
- Referrals to appropriate agencies for specialised & targeted support and assistance;
- Phone conversations, one on one meetings and (occasional) attendance at meetings for support;
- Advocacy with CSOs and government on themes and serious issues impacting carers and children and young people in home based care.

FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service: Target Constituency

The FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service is available to all carers of children and young people living in home based care in Victoria. In addition, the Carer Information and Support Service is available to CSO and government workers for information on issues impacting carers, or for the support of carers of children and young people living in home based care.

How does the Carer Information and Support Service make a difference?

In May 2009, there were 2150 children and young people living in formal care arrangements with relatives or 'kin', 1550 living in foster care placements, 500 living in residential care placements and 1550 living in permanent care placements across Victoria. In addition, statistics suggest that for every 'formal' or statutory relative/kinship placement, there are a further 4 'non-statutory' or 'informal' relative/kinship placements across Victoria. This is a staggering 14,350 children and young people reliant on people other than their natural parents for their day to day general care and well being. (Source: Directions for out of home care—May 2009, Department of Human Services)

Services such as the Carer Information and Support Service provide all carers with an avenue of hope and understanding. In many cases, carers are just in need of someone they can 'de-brief' to in times of increased stress within their household. At other instances however, they need to turn to someone who can provide objective and supportive assistance in times of great family upheaval. As these children reach adolescence and begin to explore their own identity, many of the ghosts of their past come back to haunt them, and issues of parental abandonment, drug abuse, physical, sexual and psychological abuse, mental illness and other realities can come crashing down. At these times, it is vital to have someone to go to who can objectively offer advice and guidance, point you in the direction of alternative assistance and resources, or help to lobby and garner support for whatever may have gone wrong, and help find a resolution.

Without the commitment and dedication of foster, kinship and permanent carers, Victoria's most vulnerable children would have nowhere to go. The social impact of this is almost immeasurable. With a safe home and a loving and secure family environment, these children can and do overcome their past to lead productive and positive lives. The existence of the Carer Information and Support Service helps the carers of these precious children to do an amazing job and know they are not alone while doing it. Instead they are part of a select group in our community, committed to protecting and nurturing our children, when for whatever reason, their parents cannot.

BACKGROUND

FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service—Service Evaluation 2010

It was determined the Service Evaluation would look at the following key questions:

- a) **Are carers and adoptive parents needs being met by the service, and**
- b) **How can the service be improved?**

The evaluation captures an 18 month period between July 2008 and December 2009. During this time a total of 442 calls were received. Approximately 10% of carers using the service during this time were interviewed. 70% of survey participants interviewed were foster carers, 16% permanent carers and the remaining 14% were kinship carers.

Survey participants were questioned on their service expectations, the service delivery, issue resolution and other operational aspects of the service. FCAV and PPSS employed a part time staff member to undertake survey interviews and collate the findings. The survey was administered by a person independent of the service and in a confidential manner. Completed surveys did not identify participants. If there was new follow up required following a survey interview, a new Record of Contact Sheet was opened, assigned within the service workload and resolved in accordance with Carer Information and Support Service procedure. A copy of the *Interim Evaluation Report* issued to the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner in February 2010 can be viewed under *Appendix A*.

Data findings are divided in to the following areas:

- Carer awareness of the Carer Information and Support Service
- Frequency of individual carer access to the Carer Information and Support Service
- Service needs of carers contacting the Carer Information and Support Service
- Carer service expectations of the Carer Information and Support Service
- Response time to calls by the Carer Information and Support Service
- Follow up to carer enquiries by the Carer Information and Support Service
- Resolution of carer issues by the Carer Information and Support Service
- Information and support provided to carers by the Carer Information & Support Service
- Carer Information and Support Service hours of operation
- Suggested improvements to the Carer Information and Support Service

Contact volumes for the period:

There has been a steady increase in call/contact volumes since the service was formalised in July 2008, with calls coming from all care types as the following tables illustrate:

Table 1: Contact growth by 6 monthly increments since July 2008

Dates	No. of Calls	Time Period	Increase (%)
1 Jul 08 to 31 Dec 08	103	6 months	
1 Jan 09 to 30 Jun 09	134	6 months	30%
1 Jul 09 to 31 Dec 09	204	6 months	52%
1 Jan 10 to 30 Jun 10**	300*	6 months	47%* <i>forecasted</i>

*The period 1 Jan 2010 to 30 Jun 2010 has been forecasted based on a quarterly call result for the period 1 Jan 2010 to 31 Mar 2010 of 150 calls.

80% of callers to the Carer Information and Support Service are either foster carers (including those transitioning to permanent care), workers or the general public enquiring about foster care issues. The table below provides further breakdown of the 'care type' referred to by callers to the service:

Table 2: Carer type relating to caller for the period 1 Jul 08 to 31 Dec 09

Year	ACP	Adoption	Foster Care	Foster/ Perm	Kinship	Kinship/ Perm	Perm Care	Respite	Total
2008	1	1	52	6	15	1	7	2	85
2009	0	7	275	22	38	3	12		357
Total	1	8	327	28	53	4	19	2	442
% of overall contacts	0%	2%	74%	6%	12%	1%	4%	0%	

Calls from adoptive parents, kinship carers and permanent carers (who have not transitioned from foster care) account for 19% of the carers contacting the service in the eighteen months to December 2009. This is a significant volume considering there has been limited promotion of the Carer Information and Support Service to these carers within the home based care sector. It should be noted that while call volumes from kinship carers in the six months to December 2008 and the following six months to June 2009 were very similar, the six months to December 2009 saw a 50% increase in kinship related call volumes. This increase has come about regardless of a lack of effective promotion of the service to this carer group. Refer to the *results of data collection and discussion* section of this report for further analysis on these results.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire developed in consultation with FCAV, PPSS and key stakeholders was utilised as the primary evaluation tool. Electronic administration of the questionnaire was initially considered to enable participants to complete this at their convenience and in a less intrusive manner. However, in ensuring a consistency in approach, data collection and confidentiality for the respondent, it was determined that the questionnaire would be administered by a person independent of Carer Information and Support Service.

A process of action piloting was undertaken to finalise the content and relevance of the questionnaire. This phase raised a number of ethical and resource considerations, including the impact of participants recalling particular events. The capacity of the individual conducting the survey to counsel participants and of the service to follow these matters up were also raised.

The completed piloted questionnaires were later included in the data collection and formed part of the final analysis, culminating in a total of 49 questionnaires implemented over approximately two months. The draft questionnaire incurred only minor grammatical changes. Refer to *Appendix B* for a final copy.

All participants were identified through a sampling process, whereby approximately 10% of callers within the 18 month period were contacted. Approximately 1 in 5 'Record of Contact' sheets were selected, allowing for anonymous callers and for individuals who were either non-contactable or unavailable, to be reselected. Refer to *Appendix C* for *Record of Contact Sheet* pro-forma.

A total of 16 days work was undertaken to complete the Project over a period of 20 weeks. The following table outlines the project phases and timelines:

Table 3: Project phases and timelines

Confirm objectives	7 – 20 January 2010
Determine methodology	7 – 27 January 2010
Prepare survey & pilot	13 January – 27 January 2010
Administer survey	10 February – 24 February 2010
Data Collection & Analysis	10 February – 14 April 2010
Report writing	14 April – 31 May 2010

RESULTS OF DATA COLLECTED AND DISCUSSION

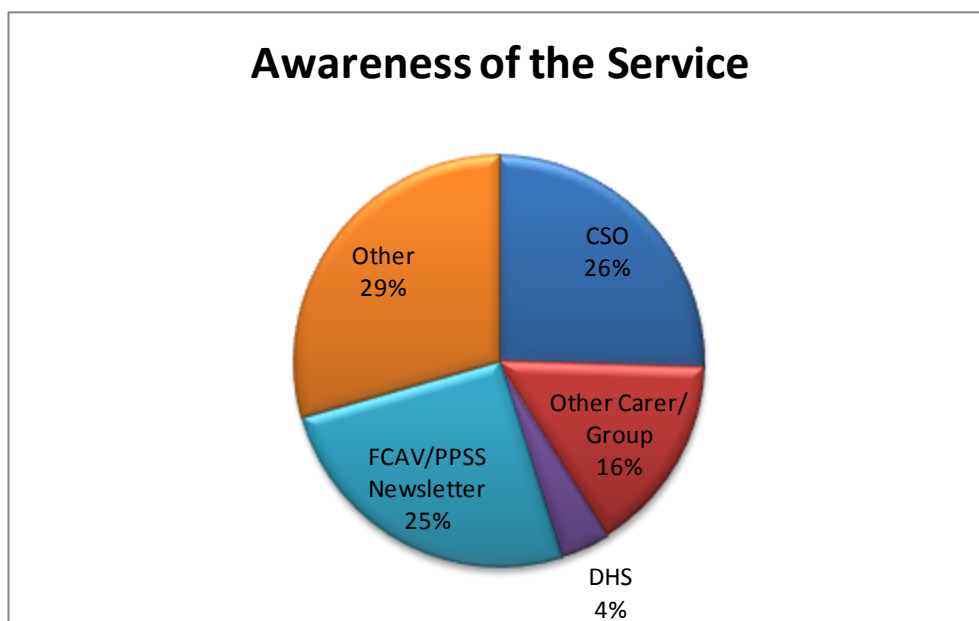
Section 1: Carer awareness of the Carer Information and Support Service

25% of participants advised they became aware of the Carer Information and Support Service through FCAV and PPSS newsletters, with a further 26% advising they learned of the service through their Community Service Organisation (CSO). This reinforces the value of the marketing strategy employed by the Carer Information and Support Service and the importance of strong relationships between the service and CSOs. However, the greatest determinant in awareness was through 'Other' sources (29%) such as the internet, friends and previous work in, or knowledge of, the sector.

Newsletters are also sent electronically, including e-news, capturing participants who clearly utilise the internet. These participants may potentially also identify the internet as the source rather than the medium in terms of service awareness.

'Other carers' as a source had a significant response (16%), with some further suspected cross over with friends. It was evident to the interviewer that foster, kinship and permanent carers become increasingly isolated from their usual support systems through caring for challenging children and young people, perhaps contributing to informal networks and friendships developing amongst carers.

Table 4: How carers learned of the Carer Information and Support Service

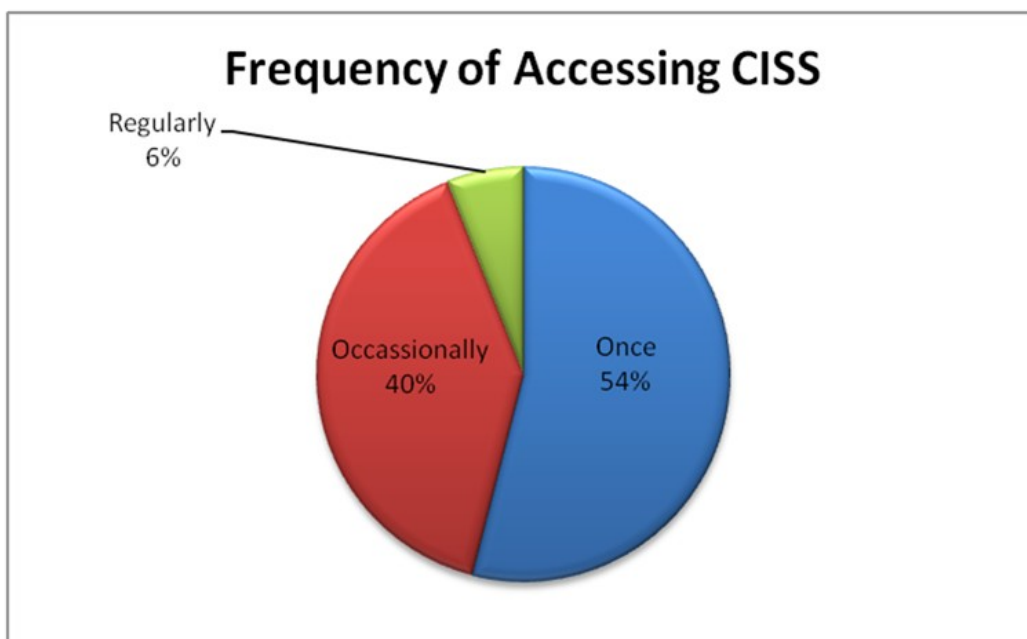


Section 2: Frequency of individual carer access to the Carer Information and Support Service

Approximately half of the participants (54%) advised they had contacted the Carer Information and Support Service only 'once.' This was clarified during implementation to mean for 'one issue', given possible follow up communication that may be required to resolve this. Available statistics from the period 1 July 2009 to 31 March 2010, indicate total file handling times to be on average approximately one hour and twenty minutes per carer case.

40% of participants identified having made contact on more than one occasion, for more than one issue, with the remaining 6% making 'regular contact' for various issues.

Table 5: How often carers had contacted the Service



Section 3: Service needs of carers contacting the Carer Information and Support Service

When asked what they needed from the Carer Information and Support Service, 58% of respondents advised they had been seeking information, while a further 13% advised of their need to debrief about recent events for them. The work output generated by these types of requests is relatively low, allowing for timely and effective responses to callers.

A more active response, however, such as advocacy which accounted for 7% of enquiries, or active support which accounted for a further 10%, has the potential to utilise greater resources and require a higher level of service response, for example attendance at meetings, travel time and preparation of minutes.

The following table details the breakdown of service requirements.

Table 6: Breakdown of carer service requirements



9% of callers flagged 'Other' as their Carer Information and Support Service need. The reasons or service need specified in these instances were:

- Requiring legal advice/referral, which the service doesn't provide (carers can however be directed to appropriate services);
- Requiring update on policy work being undertaken by FCAV;
- Requiring advice on escalating issues through the media;
- Recommendations to various support services.

Section 4: Carer service expectations of the Carer Information and Support Service

A Leichardt scale asks participants to rate their experiences on a scale of 1 to 5. This method of capturing data was employed to measure whether carers expectations of the service had fallen short of expectation, had been met, or, had been exceeded.

Table 7: Breakdown of carer service expectations



As the table above demonstrates, the majority of participants indicated that their expectations had been met, with 57% having their expectations either partially or fully exceeded, and a further 8% satisfied with the service they received. These carers commonly identified receiving prompt support and advised that the service had been able to clarify information that had previously been contradictory or ambiguous.

Further comments made by carers surveyed included:

- *"(The service) Did what they said they were going to do".*
- *"Gave me what they could and advised me to call back if needing further assistance".*
- *"Staff were not only available to attend meetings but would meet as required or for follow up".*
- *"Very supportive, sent emails, letters and attended meetings".*
- *"Allowed me to vent prior to entering a meeting, providing clarity and perspective".*
- *"Provided options and a contingency (next step)".*
- *"A number of different staff attended meetings, would meet to follow up or prepare for meetings".*
- *"Made phone calls to DHS, kept in contact, provided updates".*

On reflection, the use of students to staff the Carer Information and Support Service may have impacted on carers having their expectations met given early on in placements students lack knowledge and practice wisdom in relation to the system and individual caller concerns. There is a strong argument for using students as a resource within the service, however it will be important in the future to identify effective ways in which this can be done in order to maximize both the carer and student experience.

8% of carers felt that their expectations had not been met at all, prompting a file analysis. This revealed a high level of expectation from carers, particularly in relation to broad systemic issues and avenues for change, as identified in the following case examples.

Case Study 1

The Carer's Issue

The carer had received conflicting information from their CSO and DHS in relation to transporting other foster children and indicated that there had been no follow up by the Carer Information and Support Service.

The carer felt that the poor information flow (between carers/agencies/DHS) could be assisted by carers being able to attend training with departmental staff and the broader 'care team', facilitating a better understanding of each other and a culture of listening. The carer was critical of Carer Information and Support Service staff, describing them as 'institutionalised' and reluctant to be critical of the Department of Human Services due to funding agreements.

File Analysis

A file analysis indicated that the carer had been advised by the service to obtain DHS advice in writing re: transport and then re-contact their CSO. The carer was also advised that carer training would be raised at the next DHS Liaison meeting and they would be advised of the outcome. As agreed, the Carer Information and Support Service provided feedback to the carer in the form of an e-mail and offered follow up support if required.

Summary Comment

In this instance the carer chose not to re-engage with the Carer Information and Support Service for further support.

Case Study 2

The Carer's Issue

The carer (paternal relative) was seeking information on their rights to appeal a decision in relation to access and stated they were given no information by the Carer Information and Support Service. This was the fourth time the carer had the child in their care due to parental mental health and substance abuse issues, and they were concerned for the child's safety should the scheduled access proceed. The carer noted that the parent had a history of cancelling access visits.

File Analysis

A file analysis indicated that the carer was advised to document their concerns inclusive of a calendar of past visitation and then ask for a care team meeting with the Department of Human Services to discuss the concerns. The carer was also advised that they could request a Permanent Care Order at the next review and that a Carer Information and Support Service member could support them at meetings if required.

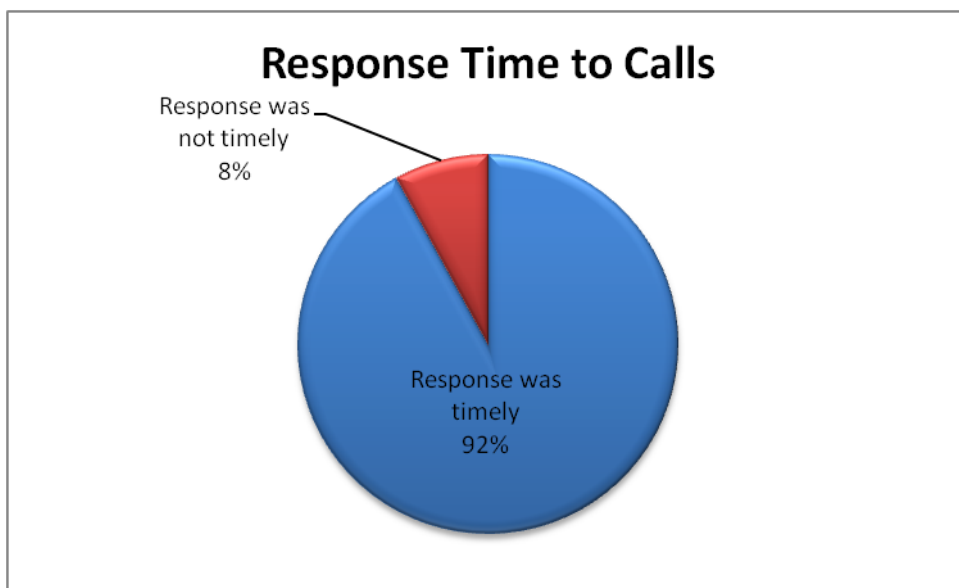
Summary Comment

Managing relationships with CSOs and working as part of a care team were significant issues in this case. When carers are struggling in their relationship with their agency, the Carer Information and Support Service will encourage the carer to communicate their needs to the agency or case manager as a first response. Where this does not achieve a satisfactory outcome, the Carer Information and Support Service are more than willing to make contact with the agency on a carers behalf. The writer is also aware that a FCAV/PPSS Info Sheet has been prepared by the service for CSOs to implement as a tool when negotiating expectations with carers. Training to support this tool may also be explored.

Section 5: Response time to calls by the Carer Information and Support Service

The majority of carers felt they received a timely response (92%), that is, calls were largely answered and resolved in the first instance, or they received a call back within 48 hours as indicated in the following table:

Table 8: CISS response time to calls received

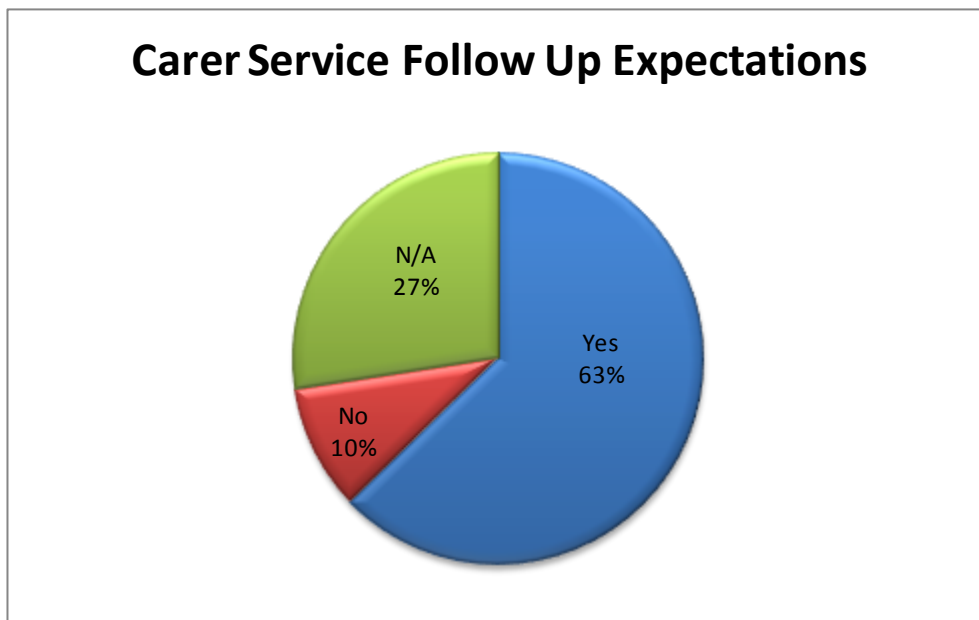


In instances where carers indicated they were unhappy with the time frames for the handling of their concern, the file analysis conducted revealed the following:

- The carer had an expectation of receiving feedback on subsequent changes to the home based care system;
- The carer did not believe 48 hours to be an adequate response time.

Section 6: Follow up to carer enquiries by the Carer Information and Support Service

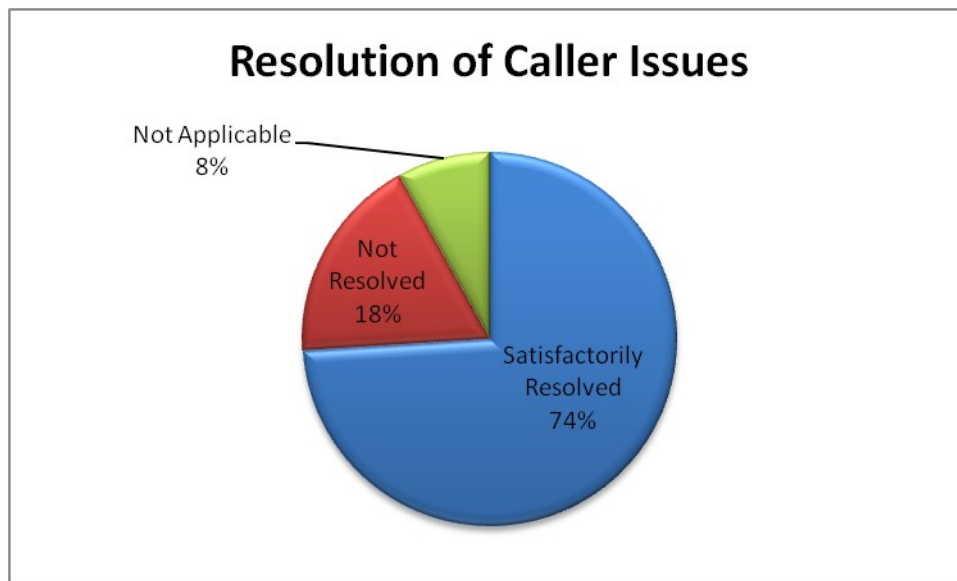
Carers were asked whether actions were followed up as agreed, where applicable. In the majority of cases, carer levels of satisfaction were high. Again, employing a Leichardt scale, 63% of callers identified having their expectations exceeded in this regard. Disregarding the 27% of calls which did not require follow up, only 10% of callers indicated they were not satisfied at all with the Carer Information and Support Service's follow up of their issue.

Table 9: Carer satisfaction of follow up delivered by CISS

Section 7: Resolution of carer issues by the Carer Information and Support Service

Where relevant, 74% of carers advised that the issues they raised with the Carer Information and Support Service were resolved to their satisfaction.

Table 10: Caller satisfaction regarding Carer Information and Support Service resolution of issues



18% of those surveyed remarked they felt the service had not effectively resolved their issue. Some of the comments captured in this regard were:

- *"FCAV were unwilling to rock the boat".*
- *"(FCAV's) funding from DHS effects their impartiality".*

It is worth noting that while the Carer Information and Support Service is very committed to supporting and resolving issues for carers, there are times where the service, FCAV and PPSS are not able to resolve issues to the carers liking or expectation because of the nature of the concern.

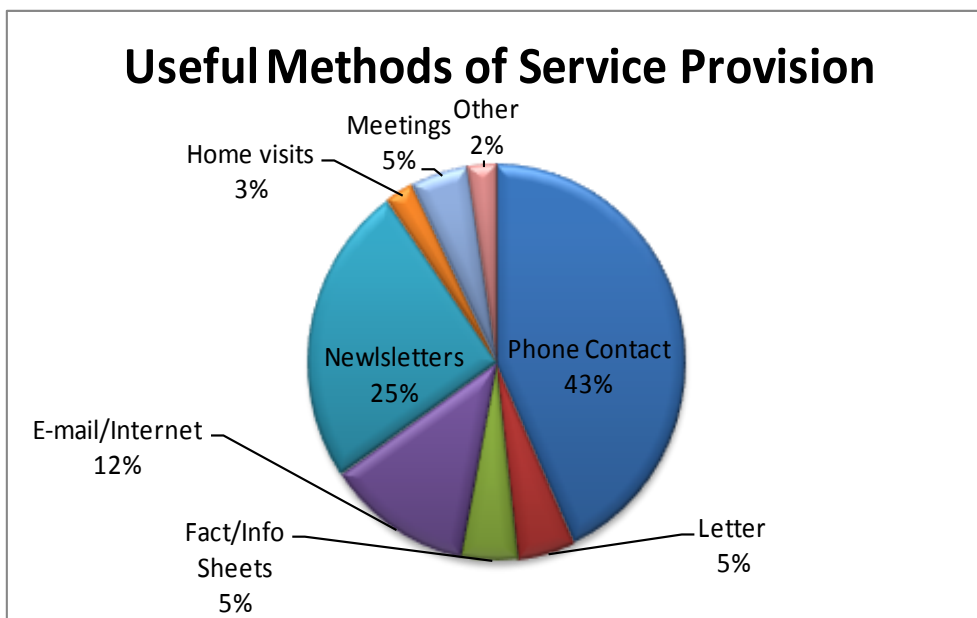
Issues such as *quality of care*, and *case planning* decisions that see the removal of children from the carer, while highly distressing for the carer, are often outside of what FCAV, PPSS and the Carer Information and Support Service can influence or amend.

Similarly, FCAV, PPSS or the Carer Information and Support Service may have minimal influence around government policy and legislative issues.

Section 8: Information and support provided to carers by the Carer Information and Support Service

There are a number of ways in which carers can receive information and support through the Carer Information and Support Service. At 68% the primary method of service provision is clearly through phone contact or mail outs. However, electronic newsletters are now provided on a bi-monthly basis, with a more condensed 'e-news' edition issued on an alternate monthly basis. The FCAV website has also recently been updated providing carers and workers with greater access to information.

Table 11: Preferred methods of information and service provision



The greatest preference indicated by carers for the accessing of information is through phone contact where an immediate service response can often be gained. Newsletters (both electronic and hard copies) have also been an effective means of transmitting information as well as via the website, supporting the introduction of e-newsletters and an upgrade of the website.

'FCAV/PPSS Info Sheets' are available via the website and are also mailed out to all new FCAV members. New FCAV/PPSS Info Sheets are also profiled in FCAV's bi-monthly newsletters. FCAV/PPSS Info Sheets, FCAV-drafted letters and face-to-face meetings accounted for 15% of preferred service provision. While home visits only account for 3% of the overall service provision, the workload timeframes around this type of service are quite substantial. Consideration is required as to how this element of the service can be effectively managed moving forward.

Section 9: Carer Information and Support Service hours of operation

Approximately 95% of carers were satisfied with the hours of operation, Monday to Thursday 9am – 5pm and Friday 9am – 4pm. One carer indicated that once the initial contact had been made to the service, that FCAV had provided support after hours and had been extremely flexible towards her needs.

The majority of foster carers have access to an after hours on-call service through their CSO for when emergency issues arise with the child/ren in their care, which they felt was sufficient. For any other matters, carers were aware of the hours of operation of the Carer Information and Support Service and believed these to be realistic and in line with their needs.

It should be noted, that the after hours on-call service run by CSOs are not available to most kinship, or permanent carers or to adoptive parents.

Section 10: Suggested improvements to the Carer Information and Support Service

The following suggestions for improvements to the Service were put forward by survey participants:

Access to the Carer Information and Support Service

- Regional offices;
- Cards with useful/emergency contact numbers, particularly for new carers;
- Ensure promotion of the service to kinship carers through the identified kinship support agencies, as well as through clear and targeted advertising on both FCAV and PPSS websites and other sector related websites. ie: The Mirabel Foundation, CREATE, the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner, and other like organisations.

Professional Development

- Provision of funding for training of all carers;
- Commissioning of kinship-specific training opportunities for both statutory and non-statutory kinship carers;

- More information about the process of permanent care and issues faced by permanent carers post legalisation. This training to be made available to all carers contemplating permanent care.

Marketing

- Link all carers in to the Carer Information and Support Service more from the beginning, like a club;
- Co-ordinate local support groups, ensuring availability of foster, kinship, permanent care and adoptive parenting support groups across the state.

Financial

- Advocate for greater financial reimbursement for carers;
- Advocate for the removal of means testing for all foster, kinship (statutory and non-statutory) and permanent carers when applying for federal government benefits through Centrelink and the Family Assistance Office;
- Allocate funding to foster carers kinship carers, permanent carers and adoptive parents to develop their own independent support group/s.

Structural

- Determine where (Carer Information and Support Service) loyalties sit as it appears to be more aligned with the CSO;
- Carers to have stronger independent input into government policies/consultative groups;
- An orientation day for foster and kinship carers at DHS to address some of the power imbalance;
- Stronger capacity to effect change today for the best interests of children;
- Listening more to concerns raised by carers regarding the children in their care as they try and navigate their way through the home based care system;

RECOMMENDATIONS

The key recommendations to come out of the evaluation are as follows:

Section 1: Carer awareness of the Carer Information and Support Service

- General awareness of the service needs to increase across the sector, particularly in areas such as kinship and permanent care. This can be achieved via targeted advertising in the FCAV and PPSS newsletters and other sector-based communication streams such as the Mirabel Foundation newsletter, agency welcome kits for newly accredited carers, and promotion through the identified CSOs providing kinship support. Increased awareness by agency workers about the Carer Information and Support Service will ensure a better understanding across the sector.
- Development of a Carer Information and Support Service website. Further investigation to go into the possibility of developing a 'stand alone' website for the Carer Information and Support Service with links back to key stakeholder websites across the home based care sector such as FCAV, PPSS, Mirabel Foundation, The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner, and other like organisations.
- As the call statistics stand now, the Carer Information and Support Service will exceed its quota of 250 calls per year from foster carers, thereby meeting the contact target set out in the FCAV Service Agreement with the Department of Human Services and the 'connecting with carers' section of the FCAV Work Plan for 2009-10. Further exploration to occur with DHS regarding adequate funding of foster care enquiries to the Carer Information and Support Service.

Section 2: Frequency of individual carer access to the Carer Information and Support Service

- Work with the 6% of 'regular users' to ensure carers are linked in effectively with their agency and that agencies are in turn providing the information, support and advocacy being sought by their carers.
- The provision of further training and support for carers in navigating relationships with agencies is considered vital to the success of a placement.

Section 3: Service needs of carers contacting the Carer Information and Support Service

- The Carer Information and Support Service was originally conceptualised as an information and de-brief/phone support service. FCAV and PPSS do undertake policy work, the progress of which is made available to carers through the respective organisation's newsletters. A peak body representing kinship carers is required to ensure there is an appropriate avenue available for the support and advocacy of kinship issues.
- 17% of carers to the service were seeking either 'active support' or 'advocacy' assistance from the service. FCAV, PPSS and the Carer Information and Support Service need to consider how this work can be effectively resourced, given the current workload impact of these types of calls.

Section 4: Carer service expectations of the Carer Information and Support Service

- With 8% of carers surveyed not satisfied with the service they received, FCAV and PPSS need to give more consideration to articulating the purpose and role of the Carer Information and Support Service.

Section 5: Response time to calls to the Carer Information and Support Service

- Clearly stated timeframes for call backs and resolutions to calls will help to give callers to the service realistic timeframe expectations.

Section 6: Follow up to carer enquiries by the Carer Information and Support Service

- It is important for Carer Information and Support Service staff to advise carers very clearly about what the service can and cannot achieve in terms of issue resolution. This will help to ensure carers have a realistic expectation of the service and what outcomes might be achieved.

Section 7: Resolution of carer issues by the Carer Information and Support Service

- FCAV, PPSS and Kinship groups separately undertake to advocate for foster, permanent and kinship carers across the sector. Further consideration needs to occur at both FCAV and PPSS Board levels regarding a clearer advocacy agenda and where appropriate, a more aligned and considered approach to these advocacy efforts.
- Further consideration and funding is required to establish carer support groups independent of CSOs to ensure carers have a social network on which they can rely and benefit from.

Section 8: Information and support provided to carers by the Carer Information and Support Service

- The ongoing data collection conducted by the service has ensured that an issue-based and informative newsletter is now published on a bi-monthly by the FCAV, along with an electronic 'e-news' issuing on the alternate months. Excerpts of the Carer Information and Support Service monthly/quarterly reporting is provided to all carers through the FCAV Newsletter and Carer Information and Support Service e-news publications as well as the PPSS email newsletter.
- FCAV/PPSS Info Sheets are developed and issued periodically in response to themes raised by carers through the service.
- The evaluation has highlighted the need for a phone-based service to continue allowing carers the opportunity to call and talk to someone who can relate to, and understand, the issues surrounding foster, kinship, permanent care and adoption.
- Further consideration needs to be given as to how FCAV, PPSS and the service can manage the carer need for 'in-person' support and advocacy at meetings and home visits.

Section 9: Suggested improvements to the Carer Information and Support Service

- FCAV to continue undertaking regional visits and hosting regional training opportunities in order to ensure carers remain connected in provincial Victoria.
- FCAV and PPSS to advocate for increased training opportunities for all foster, kinship and permanent carers.
- FCAV and PPSS to consider ways in which carer input can be facilitated in policy development and consultation groups.
- The FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service to acknowledge broader systemic issues and find ways to provide opportunities to empower carers.
- FCAV and PPSS to consider how carers can have a more respected and heard role as advocates for the specific children and young people in their care.
- PPSS to undertake an increased role in the advocacy and support for kinship carers to ensure this ever increasing group of carers is adequately and appropriately represented at a state level.
- PPSS to commission kinship-specific training for non-statutory and statutory kinship carers across the state. Regional training opportunities to be offered as part of this training initiative.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A**Post Placement Support Service (Vic) Inc & Foster Care Association of Victoria Inc****Carer Information & Support Service Evaluation 2010****Interim Report as at 5 February 2010****Introduction & History**

The Post Placement Support Service (Vic) Inc (PPSS) and the Foster Care Association of Victoria Inc (FCAV) have agreed to undertake an evaluation of the FCAV/PPSS Carer Information & Support Service (CISS), formally the FCAV/PPSS Carer Help Line.

The FCAV/PPSS Carer Information & Support Service was first established in 2006, when it was established that both organisations were running similar informal services, managed by the respective Committee of Management members. In July 2008, the service was formalised with the employment of a Help Line Coordinator and the subsequent development and introduction of a comprehensive carer issues database.

FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service: Purpose

The FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service provides information, support, referrals and advocacy to all carers of children and young people living in home based care. Through support and advocacy for carers, we aim to represent the needs of children/young people living in home based care.

The FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service has four main aims:

- Provision of accurate and clear information via phone calls, both organisations' websites, newsletters and fact sheets;
- Referrals to appropriate agencies for specialised and targeted support and assistance;
- Phone conversations, one on one meetings and (occasional) attendance at meetings for support;
- Advocacy with CSOs and government on themes and serious issues impacting carers and children and young people in home based care;

FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service: Target Constituency

The FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service is available to all carers of children and young people living in home based care in Victoria. In addition, the Carer Information and Support Line service is available to CSO and government workers for information on issues impacting carers or for the support of carers of children and young people living in home based care.

FCAV/PPSS Carer Information & Support Service: Database Reporting

Since July 2008, regular reporting has been issued, initially on a monthly basis, and now on a quarterly basis, detailing the issues raised by callers to the support line. This reporting has in turn helped to drive the advocacy agendas of both FCAV and PPSS while also allowing us to gather accurate data on the issues facing carers across Victoria.

User statistics since July 2008

In the eighteen month period from July 2008 to December 2009, the Carer Info & Support Service has received 468 separate contacts from carers, workers, prospective carers and others seeking information or assistance through the support service. The following is a breakdown of some of the key statistics for the period:

Method and Volume of Contact

Year	Phone	Email	Letter	Website	Fax	Total
2008	90	13	1			104
2009	329	29	5		1	364
	419	42	6	0	1	468

Status of Caller

Year	Carer	Worker	Prospect carer*	Other	Total
2008	74	6	0	24	104
2009	241	30	43	50	364
	315	36	43	74	468

*Prospective carer category introduced in 2009

Type of Care (where relevant care type was identified)

Year	ACP	Adoption	Foster Care	Foster/Perm	Kinship	Kinship/Perm	Perm Care	Respite	Total
2008	1	1	52	6	15	1	7	2	85
2009	0	7	275	22	38	3	12		357
	1	8	327	28	53	4	19	2	442
% of overall contacts	0%	2%	74%	6%	12%	1%	4%	0%	

CISS Evaluation: Progress to date

- An Evaluation Project Reference group has been convened, comprising members from PPSS and FCAV;
- A project plan has been developed and signed off by the Evaluation Project Reference Group;
- A proposed questionnaire has been drafted and is ready for sign off by the Evaluation Project Reference Group (refer attached);
- A pilot of the proposed questionnaire has been conducted by Kristen Mercieca. Kristen is currently working one day a week with FCAV, and will conduct the majority of the carer interviews as she is independent of both PPSS and FCAV.
- Sampling – a random sampling of 50 carers, workers, prospective carers and 'others' has been identified. Every fifth contact file for the period July 2008 to December 2009 has been selected to ensure an unbiased selection of contacts for the purposes of collecting feedback.

Cas O'Neill
Secretary
Post Placement Support Service

Beth Laister
Help Line Coordinator
Foster Care Association of Victoria

APPENDIX B



FCAV/PPSS Carer Information & Support Service

Questionnaire




General

File no & Care Type:

Q1 How did you learn about CISS?

- CSO
- Carer Group
- OCSC
- DHS
- FCAV/PPSS newsletter
- Other _____

Q2 How often have you accessed CISS in the past 18 months?

- Once
- Occasionally
- Regularly

Expectations **More than 1 contact seek overall assessment*

Q3 What were you initially seeking from your contact with CISS?

- Info
- Referrals
- Debrief/Listen/Support
- Active Support
- Advocacy
- Other

Q4 Were your expectations met?

I _____ 5
 Not met Exceeded

If so, can you explain how?

If not, what more did you feel we could have done?

Service Delivery/Resolution

Q5 Did you receive a timely response?

- Yes
- No

If no, what timeframe were you hoping for?



**FCAV/PPSS Carer Information & Support Service
Questionnaire**



Service Delivery/Resolution

Q6 Were actions followed up as agreed?

- Yes
- No

If Yes, how satisfied were you with the follow up

I _____ 5
 Not satisfied Exceeded expectations

Q7 Were the issues you raised resolved to your satisfaction? *As far as possible with FCAV

- Yes
- No

Improvement

Q8 What has been the most useful way for you of receiving information and support from the CISS?

- Phone contact
- Letter
- Fact/ info Sheets
- E-mail/Internet
- Newsletters
- Home visits
- Meetings
- Other

Q9 Do the hours of operation of the info and support service/ helpline meet your support needs?

- Yes
- No

If no, comment

Q10 How do you believe the service could be improved. What more do you think we could offer?

Interviewer: _____ Length of interview: _____

Follow up required: _____

Issues were resolved in the initial call: Yes No

(Please record details of any action taken below along with detail of any action yet to be taken)

Recommendations / Actions / Follow Up / Referrals:

(Please include dates, details of follow up calls, timelines and individuals responsible, along with confirmation the matter has been finalised with the caller)

Referrals made to:

Resources sent to the caller as part of file resolution:

(Refer to resource guide – e.g. for Quality of Care Fact Sheet, record *CISS.6*; for FCAV newsletter, record *R2*)

Resources forwarded via: Post Email **Associated postage costs:** \$ _____

Is any further follow up required? Yes No

If 'Yes', please detail what action is required and by whom:

Date resolved: _____ **Is the caller satisfied with the outcome?** Yes No

Was action initiated within 2 business days of receiving contact? Yes No

What core operational service was provided to this caller:

- Provision of clear and accurate information
- Referral to appropriate agency for specialised and targeted support and assistance
- Individual Support – 'Within the Hour' – minimal follow up required
- Individual Support – 'Multiple Contact' – significant, active support required
- Individual Support – 'Intensive Support' – one-on-one meetings, attendance at meetings
- Advocacy

Total file handling time (Please include 5 mins of database loading time): _____



FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service

**Providing care for carers
Mondays—Thursdays, 9am to 5pm
Fridays, 9am, to 4pm**

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