



# KEEPING OUT-OF-HOME CARE STRONG IN VICTORIA

Strategic Solutions to Combat Foster Carer

Attrition and Enhance Support Systems

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

**OOHC:** Out-of-Home Care

**CPI:** Consumer Price Index

**AIHW:** Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

**ABS:** Australian Bureau of Statistics

**DFFH:** Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing

**DHHS:** Department of Health and Human Services

**CFECFW:** Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

**FCAV:** Foster Care Association of Victoria

**PCAF:** Permanent and Adoptive Families

## Executive Summary

This report was developed to identify key factors contributing to Victoria's rising foster carer attrition rates, particularly those impacting carer satisfaction and experience. The report centres around three of the most recurrent issues expressed by foster carers: **Financial strain, cultural and systems-based issues, and hindered access to support networks**. Where possible, this report applies a regional lens to acknowledge the unique socio-economic, geographical, and cultural aspects of providing foster caregiving in Victoria's regions. This perspective has often been overlooked by research exploring foster carer challenges and retention strategies.

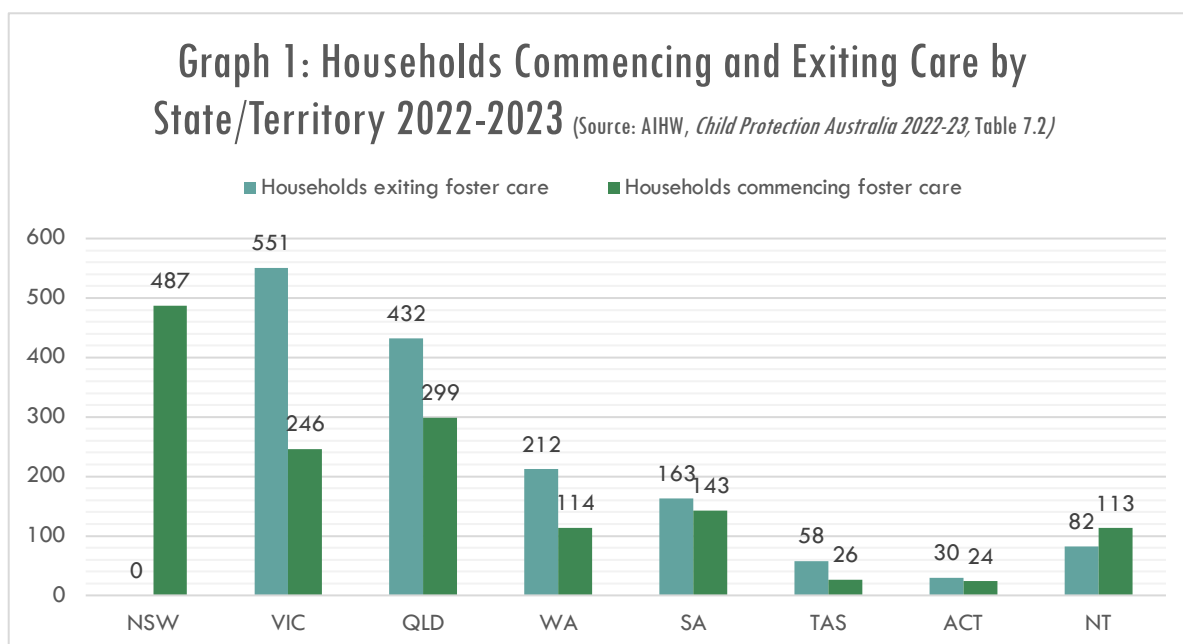
Through analysis of international and interstate programs and policies specifically aimed at supporting foster carers, this report provides several evidence-based recommendations which can be utilised to reduced Victoria's foster carer attrition rates. These recommendations are briefly summarised below:

- **The immediate increase of Victoria's care allowance to align with other Australian Jurisdictions.**
- **Introduction of an allowance indexation mechanism that matches inflation.**
- **Introduction of a regional loading scheme.**
- **Development of a joint training program (mirrored on Wales's Fostering Wellbeing) to enhance collaboration and understanding between foster carers and child protection practitioners.**
- **Expansion of the Caring Life app to allow foster carers easy access to key placement documentation.**
- **State-sponsored roll-out of the evidence-based caring model, the Mockingbird Family, with a particular focus on Victoria's central and northern regions.**

# Introduction

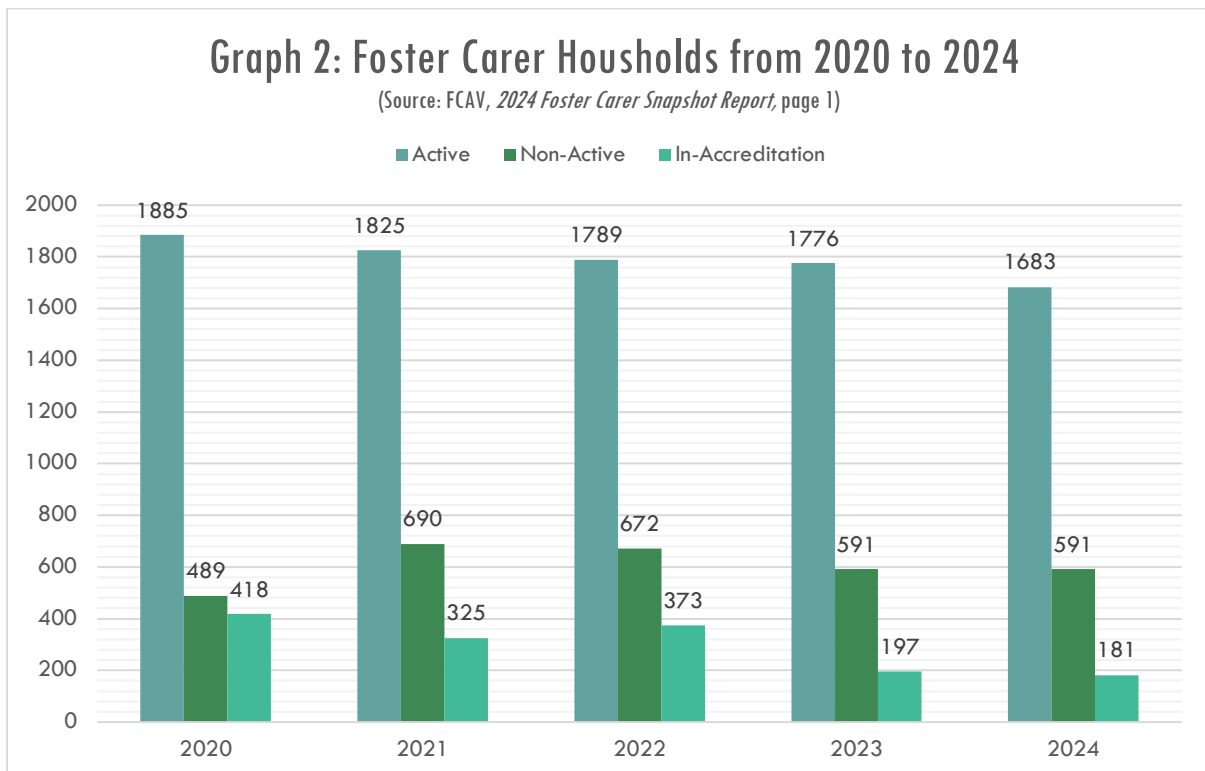
## Background

Victoria’s foster care system is facing significant ongoing challenges with high carer attrition rates. Despite increasing demand for family-based out-of-home care options, the number of available foster carers is declining, contributing to a strained system that cannot meet the needs of vulnerable children requiring stable and supportive placements. Recent data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare underscores the severity of these issues; during the 2022-2023 period, Victoria saw the departure of 551 foster carers, constituting 36% of the country’s total foster carer exits. Further compounding the impact of these exits, only 246 new foster families entered the Victorian system, a recruitment rate that fails to match attrition levels.<sup>1</sup> This shortfall is further exacerbated by a growing trend of carers taking temporary breaks due to burnout, which is often a precursor to permanent departure from the system.



<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Data Tables: Child Protection Australia 2022-23* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2023), Table 7.2. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-insights/data>.

According to the FCAV's 2024 *Foster Carer Snapshot*, the number of active foster carer households has dropped by 5.2% from the previous year, with nearly 100 fewer households available for placements. Only 252 new carers became accredited, while 370 exited the system, resulting in a loss of 93 foster carers.<sup>2</sup> As the below graph demonstrates, declining numbers of active foster carers and households undertaking the accreditation process has been a continuing trend in Victoria in recent years.



Although altruism remains a central motivator for foster carers, recent surveys and reviews reveal that many leave the system due to ongoing challenges including financial strain, insufficient access to formal and informal supports, and a prevailing feeling that their vital role within the child protection system is undervalued. These persistent issues underscore an urgent need to address key factors impacting carer attrition.

<sup>2</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, 2024 *Foster Carer Snapshot Report, Report* (Melbourne, Victoria: March 2024), 2. [https://www.fcav.org.au/assets/carers-snapshot-data-2024-\(3\).pdf](https://www.fcav.org.au/assets/carers-snapshot-data-2024-(3).pdf).

## Research Aim and Scope

This report narrows its focus to the challenges of foster carers, with a particular emphasis on the ongoing issue of foster carer attrition in Victoria's OOHC system. The aim is to identify key factors contributing to carer attrition, particularly those impacting carer satisfaction and retention rates. Analysis of sector and academic reviews reveals three key themes: financial strain, systems and cultural issues (such as undervaluation and restricted access to essential documentation), and a lack of access to both formal and informal support networks. This report explores these factors in depth to understand their impact and identify strategies to improve support for foster carers.

Additionally, while carer attrition is a statewide issue, this report incorporates a regional lens where possible, to acknowledge the unique socio-economic, geographical, and cultural factors affecting foster carers in Victoria's regional communities, an often-overlooked perspective in current research and data.

## Limitations

Due to strict security and privacy regulations within Victoria's child protection system, as well as the constraints set by Australian Catholic University's ethical research guidelines, obtaining exact and in-depth data regarding foster carers in specific regions of Victoria proved to be a significant challenge. This limitation restricted the ability to analyse regional specific trends and issues, especially those impacting foster carers located within the electorate of Euroa and its immediate surroundings. Access to this type of specified data could have provided a more nuanced understanding of foster carer attrition and its impact on a localised level.

As a result, this report focused its research on broader datasets and general findings from key sector leaders such as the Foster Care Association of Victoria, the Commission for Children and Young People, and the Centre for Excellence in Family and Child Welfare. Future studies could benefit from exploring alternative methods of accessing more granular data so that the recommendations made in this report can be more effectively tailored to service local communities.

## Report Structure

The following report has been structured into four chapters. Chapter 1 provides insight into Victoria's OOHC system including key policy frameworks and the impact that higher carer attrition rates is already having. The following three chapters are centred around the three most recurrent issues experienced by foster carers:

- Chapter 2 – Financial strain.
- Chapter 3 – Culture and Systems Related Issues.
- Chapter 4 – Access to Supports for Foster Carers.

As each of these issues is quite specific with limited overlap, the report's recommendations have been integrated throughout, following the analysis at the end of each chapter.

# Chapter 1 – Out-of-Home Care in the Victorian Context

## 1.1 Child Protection in Victoria

### Current Policies and Carer Strategies

In response to growing demands on the child protection system in recent years, Victoria has implemented several policies aimed at targeting early intervention and supporting home-based carers. Two central policy programs underpinning Victoria's child protection strategies are:

- **The Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children** – introduced in 2016, this framework prioritises early intervention and family preservation with the goal of creating safe stable environments for children and young people.<sup>3</sup> It seeks to reduce the number of children entering care by offering supports to families in crisis before problems escalate.
- **Strong Carers, Stronger Children** – introduced in 2019, this program was developed to address the specific needs of home-based carers, with an emphasis on improving carer retention through enhanced resources, training, financial support, and recognition.<sup>4</sup> This initiative aims to alleviate some of the most common stressors reported by home-based carers to support their role within the broader child protection framework.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cube Group, *Valuing something that really matters: the economic value of Foster Care in Victoria* (Melbourne, Victoria: March 2022), 11. <https://cubegroup.com.au/studies//>; Department of Health and Human Services, *Strong carers, stronger children: Supporting kinship, foster, and permanent carers to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people in care* (Melbourne: Victorian State Government, October 2019), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Commission for Children and Young People, *In our own words: systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system* (Melbourne, Victoria: November 2019), 325. <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/Publications-inquiries/CCYP-In-Our-Own-Words.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, *Strong carers, stronger children*, 5

## Recent Focus on Kinship Care

A foundational principle in Victorian child protection is the preference for kinship care over foster care whenever possible, recognising that placing children within their extended family or cultural community often provides greater continuity, stability, and cultural identity, particularly for Indigenous children who are overrepresented in these systems. Following the implementation of the *Roadmap to Reform* in 2016, there has been an increase in the number of kinship placements; a 2022 report by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office noted that the number of children in kinship care increased by 33.2% between 2017 and 2021, from 5,557 to 7,429 individual placements.<sup>6</sup> This shift towards prioritising kinship care has resulted in less focus being devoted to supporting foster care development, despite foster care placements being essential tools when kinship placements are not deemed to be the most appropriate option.

### 1.2 The Impact of High Carer Attrition

The shortage of available foster carers drives frequent placement disruptions, which negatively impacts a child's emotional, educational, and social outcome, compounding the trauma they have already experienced. As more carers leave the system, those who remain face rising demand, often resulting in heightened stress and burnout. The effects of these pressures ripple through the entire child protection network, with agencies and department workers forced to rely on crisis placements which may not align most effectively with the interests of the child.

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<sup>6</sup> Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Kinship Care* (Melbourne, Victoria: June 2022), 14. [https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/20220622\\_Kinship-Care.pdf](https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/20220622_Kinship-Care.pdf).

Moreover, Victoria's continually dwindling pool of foster carers force child protection practitioners to utilise residential care placements at a higher rate. This shift has detrimental effects on the wellbeing of children in care and is financially burdensome. Between June 2020 to June 2023 there was a 90% increase in the number of children aged under 12 being placed into residential care, a trend that places immense strain on government resources.<sup>7</sup> As a 2022 Cube Group report on the economic value of Victorian foster carers noted, one residential placement costs an average of \$847,000 per year, equating to approximately \$2,320 per day.<sup>8</sup> Increased residential care placements also exposes children to the emotional and developmental risks associated with these settings.

### 1.3 The Need for a Regional Lens

A regionally tailored approach to child protection is essential in Victoria, where geographic and cultural diversity influence the availability and effectiveness of support for carers and children. Regional communities, particularly those in lower socioeconomic areas, face unique challenges, including limited access to health services, reduced resources and greater isolation.

At present there is no official state level policy directly aimed at supporting foster carers living and caregiving in regional settings. Whilst regional care agencies, such as Mallee Family Care and Upper Murray Family Care, provide extensive support to their carers,

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<sup>7</sup> Monash Sustainable Development Institute, *Enhancing the Attraction and Retention of Foster Carers in Victoria: Policy Considerations* (Melbourne, Victoria: OzChild and The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, July 2024), 3. [https://www.ozchild.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/OzChild-The-Centre-BWA-2024\\_07\\_MSIDIPolicyBrief\\_v2.pdf](https://www.ozchild.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/OzChild-The-Centre-BWA-2024_07_MSIDIPolicyBrief_v2.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Cube Group, *Valuing something that really matters: the economic value of Foster Care in Victoria*, 8.

the absence of a centralised state-sponsored approach to support carers in regional areas creates disparities in service delivery and resources across the state.

## Chapter 2 – Financial Strain

### 2.1 Current Care Allowance Structure in Victoria

As foster carers fulfill a volunteer role, the fortnightly care allowance is not a payment to the carer but is instead designed to cover the day-to-day costs of providing for the child living in their care.<sup>9</sup>

Introduced in 2016 under the *Roadmap for Reform*, the current allowance spans across five levels with educational and medical expenses incorporated into each level.<sup>10</sup> The DFFH assesses each child in OOHC to determine their specific financial needs (e.g., increased costs due to a child having a learning disability or chronic illness) and then allocates the child to the appropriate payment level.

Separate to the fortnightly care allowance, foster carers may also be eligible for additional payments, such as:

- **New Placement Allowance** to cover start-up costs of caring for a child.
- **School Attendance Allowance** to contribute to educational costs.
- **Client Support Funding** to help cover one-off or emergency costs not covered by the fortnightly care allowance or other existing funding programs.<sup>11</sup>

#### What does the Care Allowance cover?

The care allowance is intended to cover:

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<sup>9</sup> Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, “Support for home based carers in Victoria,” Victorian State Government, last modified June 27, 2024, <https://services.dffh.vic.gov.au/support-carers>.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, “Support for home based carers in Victoria.”

<sup>11</sup> Cube Group, *Valuing something that really matters: the economic value of Foster Care in Victoria*, 16; Foster Carer Association of Victoria, *Carer Strategy: Carer Issues Discussion Paper* (Melbourne, Victoria: December 2018), 18. [https://www.fcav.org.au/assets/fcav\\_carer\\_strategy\\_discussion\\_paper2018.pdf](https://www.fcav.org.au/assets/fcav_carer_strategy_discussion_paper2018.pdf).

- Utilities, accommodation, clothing, food, and telecommunication technologies (i.e., phone and internet).
- Basic toiletries.
- Transport required as part of a daily routine (i.e., travel to and from school).
- Entertainment, social activities, hobbies and club memberships.<sup>12</sup>

However, due to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis and financial impact of increasing inflation rates, many agencies and peak bodies, as well as the carers they represent, believe the Victorian care allowance fails to cover the real-world costs carers incur.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2 Victoria's Care Allowance in Comparison with the Rest of Australia

Victoria has one of the lowest base care allowance rates for its youngest age bracket in Australia. With the level one payment for 0–7-year-olds coming in at \$446 per fortnight, Victorian children and their carers receive less financial support than their counterparts in other states/territories. In Queensland, a state that has a similar OOHC population to Victoria, the base care allowance for the youngest age bracket (0-5 years) is \$611 per fortnight; this is an extra \$165 that Queensland children receive fortnightly, adding up to \$4,290 annually.<sup>14</sup> Below is a table outlining the base payments (i.e., equivalent to Victoria's level one payment) for the youngest age bracket for each Australian jurisdiction.

<sup>12</sup> Cube Group, *Valuing something that really matters: the economic value of Foster Care in Victoria*, 16; Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Carer Strategy: Carer Issues Discussion Paper*, 18.

<sup>13</sup>Orima Research, *FCAV Carer Census 2024: Survey of Foster Carers* (Melbourne, Victoria: Foster Care Association of Victoria, June 2024), 11. <https://www.fcav.org.au/assets/census-report-2024.pdf>; Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Carer Life Survey – September 2018* (Melbourne, Victoria: 2018), 5. <https://www.fcav.org.au/assets/policies/carerlife4results.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, "Comparative care allowance rates per jurisdictions in Australia," Foster Care Association of Victoria, last modified September 4, 2024, <https://www.fcav.org.au/news/victoria-has-the-lowest-care-allowance-rate-in-the-country>; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Data Tables: Child Protection Australia 2022-23*, Table 5.1.

**Table 1: Base Care Allowance Payment Across Australia**

State/Territory	Fortnightly Amount	Age Range
<b>Victoria</b>	<b>\$446</b>	<b>0-7 Years</b>
Australian Capital Territory	\$620	0-4 Years
Queensland	\$611	0-5 Years
New South Wales	\$564	0-4 Years
Northern Territory	\$531	0-5 Years
South Australia	\$449	0-4 Years
Tasmania	\$466	0-5 Years
Western Australia	\$478 (including clothing allowance)	0-6 Years

Source: FCAV.<sup>15</sup>

The above table also highlights the differences in age bracket ranges across Australian states and territories. Notably, Victoria’s care allowance structure features the widest age range for its youngest bracket, 0-7 years, while most states and territories have initial age categories ranging from 0-4 or 0-5 years. This broader range delays payment increases, meaning that Victorian foster carers are not eligible for an allowance increase until the child in their care is eight.<sup>16</sup>

This extended age range has financial consequences for carers, as children start school well before reaching seven. School-related expenses, including uniforms, stationary supplies, and extracurricular activities, represent an additional cost burden that is not adequately covered under Victoria’s current allowance rate for children under the age of eight.<sup>17</sup> Other states have aligned their age brackets and payment increases roughly around key educational stages; for example, New South Wales age brackets are 0-4, 5-13, 14-17, and 16-17 years, and Queensland’s are 0-5, 6-10 and 11-17 years.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, “Comparative care allowance rates per jurisdictions in Australia,” Table 1.

<sup>16</sup>Victorian Council of Social Service, *VCOSS 2024 Victorian Budget Submission* (Melbourne, Victoria: 2024), 45. <https://vcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/VCOSS-2024BudgetSub-Final.pdf>; Foster Care Association of Victoria, “Comparative care allowance rates per jurisdictions in Australia.”

<sup>17</sup> Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care* (Melbourne, Victoria: November 2023), 141. <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/Publications-inquiries/let-us-learn/CCYP-Education-inquiry-report-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, “Comparative care allowance rates per jurisdictions in Australia”; Queensland Family & Child Commission, *Carer Allowances: QFCC Insights Paper* (Brisbane, Queensland: 2023) 2-

## 2.3 The Impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis

The rising cost of living in Australia has significantly increased the expenses associated with raising children, both within and outside the OOHC system. A July 2024 survey conducted by Canstar Blue provides insight to the increasing costs of raising children.

This survey found that on average Australian parents were spending approximately \$1,073 per month – equating to \$12,876 per year - on child related expenses. These figures have risen since 2018, when parents on average were spending \$736 per month, or \$8,840 per year, two raise two children.<sup>19</sup> Whilst this is a generalised view of quite a complex issue, it does highlight how expenses related to child rearing have consistently increased over the past six years.

Foster carers already bear unique financial pressures in their caregiving roles; therefore, the ongoing cost-of-living crisis has acutely impacted this community. Many children entering the foster care system arrive with few or no personal belongings, requiring immediate purchase of essentials. As one carer stated in a 2023 interview with the Herald Sun:

*“A lot of the time these kids will turn up with nothing and you’re having to buy everything - bottles, dummies, nappies, backpacks, school uniforms.”<sup>20</sup>*

While carers receive a new placement allowance to help cover these initial costs, the fortnightly ongoing allowance has not been adjusted to keep up with inflation. As a result,

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3. <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-05/Carer%20allowances%20-%20QFCC%20Insights%20Paper.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Bollerman, Rachel, “The average cost of raising kids in Australia,” Canstar Blue, last modified August 6, 2024, <https://www.canstarblue.com.au/news/the-average-cost-of-raising-kids-in-australia/#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20cost%20of,equates%20to%20%2412%2C876%20per%20year.>

<sup>20</sup> Carly Douglas, “High cost of underpayment: foster carers dropping out as state’s low rates leave them out of pocket,” *Herald Sun*, September 10, 2023, Victorian Parliamentary Library Database.

the value of this payment has declined in real terms, often leaving carers to cover the shortfall.

### Care Allowance Indexation vs CPI Inflation

The indexation rate of the care allowance, set between 2 to 2.5% in recent years, has lagged far behind inflation, which reached 6% in 2022-2023.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the purchasing power of the allowance has eroded, leaving carers with less support than they received several years ago. As everyday expenses such as groceries, utilities, and fuel increases, the stagnant allowance and ineffectual indexation rate has forced many carers to use their own funds to meet the basic needs of the children in their care.

To highlight how the cost-of-living crisis has deteriorated the real-world value of Victoria’s care allowance, FCAV has conducted an analysis examining changes over the past four years. The table below presents this analysis, focusing on the level 1 allowance for 0–7-year-olds, illustrating the growing gap between the allowance and reality of living costs.

**Table 2: Level 1 (0-7years) Allowance Rates, Indexation and CPI**

Year	Care Allowance Level 1 0-7years per fortnight	New Rate	Percent Increase	Amount Increase Per Fortnight	Inflation (CPI)	Increase if indexed to CPI	Real Value Decline Per Fortnight
2021	\$410	\$418.68	2%	\$8.68	3.8%	\$15.58	\$6.90
2022	\$418.68	\$427.05	2%	\$8.37	6.1%	\$25.49	\$17.12
2023	\$427.05	\$435.59	2%	\$8.54	7.0%	\$29.89	\$21.35
2024	\$435.59	\$446.47	2.5%	\$10.88	3.6%	\$15.68	\$4.80
<b>Total</b>				<b>\$36.47</b>			<b>\$50.17</b>

Source: FCAV.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, VCOSS 2024 Victorian Budget Submission, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, “FCAV Care Allowance Rates and Indexation Analysis,” Foster Care Association of Victoria, last modified October 7, 2024, <https://www.fcav.org.au/news/fcav-care-allowance-rates-and-indexation-analysis>.

This financial strain is compounded by the additional and often unpredictable costs associated with fostering. Many carers report having to pay out of pocket for medical expenses, therapy sessions, school supplies, and extracurricular activities. In a 2022 report prepared for FCAV by the Cube Group, 59% of respondents reported having to use their own funds to pay for expenses associated with fostering, and another 11% noted that they failed to pay a utility bill on time.<sup>23</sup>

Not having been substantially increased since 2016, the stagnant care allowance has left many carers feeling like they are effectively subsidising the foster care system as they are contributing their own finances.<sup>24</sup> As Table 2 highlights, failing to index an already low care allowance in line with inflation, has meant that the level 1 allowance for children aged 0-7 years has declined in real-world value by \$50.17 since 2020.<sup>25</sup>

This financial burden has become a major aspect influencing growing carer attrition rates, as more carers are reaching breaking point and deciding they can no longer afford to provide care for Victoria's most vulnerable children.

## 2.4 Campaign for Increased Care Allowance

The FACV and PCAF have spearheaded a campaign to raise Victoria's care allowance, highlighting the financial strain that carers face under the current allowance structure. This campaign, initiated in 2023, has gained considerable traction in the child protection sector, as well as a wealth of media attention. At present it has 2,950 signatures to a

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<sup>23</sup> Cube Group, *Valuing something that really matters: the economic value of foster Care in Victoria*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Orima Research, *FCAV Carer Census 2024: Survey of Foster Carers*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, "FCAV Care Allowance Rates and Indexation Analysis"; Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Annual Report 2022-2023* (Melbourne, Victoria: 2023), 12.  
<https://www.fcav.org.au/assets/docs/fcav-annual-report-2023.pdf>.

petition calling for an immediate allowance increase and an indexation rate that aligns with inflation.<sup>26</sup>

Other key organisations have been echoing these arguments regarding the care allowance and indexation in their recent reports. Examples include the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare’s 2024 *Rapid Review* and the Victorian Council of Social Service’s 2024 *Victorian Budget Submission*. Both reports emphasise the need to restructure Victoria’s care allowance and attached indexation system to better align with the current economic environment.<sup>27</sup>

### **Government Response to the Campaign and the Hidden KPMG Report**

Despite the growing support for this campaign and continuing decline of foster carer numbers in Victoria, the Victorian Government has failed to commit any direct investment in raising the care allowance.<sup>28</sup> Whilst Child Protection and Family Services Minister Lizzie Blandthorn’s response to FCAV and PCAF’s campaign in July 2023 stated that “*there is more that needs to be done*”<sup>29</sup>, and that has been considerable government investment in carer services in recent years, little movement has occurred in the specific space of care allowance rates.

The Victorian Government’s lack of commitment to addressing concerns regarding Victoria’s low allowance rate is further compounded by their hesitancy to publicly

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<sup>26</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, “Petition to Increase the Care Allowance,” Foster Care Association of Victoria, last modified October 17, 2024, <https://www.fcav.org.au/news/petition-to-increase-the-care-allowance>.

<sup>27</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *VCOSS 2024 Victorian Budget Submission*, 45; The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Rapid Review: Foster Care Recruitment and Retention* (Melbourne, Victoria: April 2024), 37. [https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/CFECFW\\_RapidReview-DigitalFinal-April2024.pdf](https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/CFECFW_RapidReview-DigitalFinal-April2024.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, “Care Allowance Campaign Update August 2023,” Foster Care Association of Victoria, last modified June 22, 2023, <https://www.fcav.org.au/news/care-allowance-campaign-update-august-2023>.

<sup>29</sup> Lizzie Blandthorn MP, *Letter in Response to Samantha Hauge (FCAV) and Wendy Mason (PCAF)* (Melbourne, Victoria: July 14, 2023), [https://www.fcav.org.au/assets/docs/response\\_from\\_minister\\_blandthorn.pdf](https://www.fcav.org.au/assets/docs/response_from_minister_blandthorn.pdf).

publish a KPMG consultancy report on this issue. This report, commissioned by the Andrew's Labor government and initially released in January 2022, was viewed by some members of the media and child protection community before being removed from the public view after it was deemed to be matter of Cabinet confidence.

Various media outlets who had the chance to view the report state that it recommended a 67% increase in Victoria's current care allowance structure, totalling at the time an additional \$114 million per year to offset the costs of rising inflation.<sup>30</sup> The recommendations of the hidden KPMG report have gone unaddressed, with many advocates and carers expressing their frustration, as failing to increase the allowance contributes to continued financial instability for carers and threatens the stability of an already strained foster care system.

## **2.5 Regional Cost Pressures and the Case for Regional Loading**

Narrowing this issue down to a more regional scope, the cost-of-living crisis has placed an acute financial strain on carers in regional Victoria, where increased expenses for essential goods, particularly food and fuel, significantly intensifies the existing pressures faced by regional foster carers.

In general, Victoria's inner and outer regional areas have struggled significantly with rising inflation, as prices of everyday necessities increased. Throughout 2022, Bendigo's FoodShare manager Bridget Bently estimated that their food relief program supported

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<sup>30</sup> John Ferguson, "Secret report reveals Victoria carer shortfall," *The Australian*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/secret-report-reveals-victoria-carer-shortfall/news-story/5490264ce4ee4086a70cf9dfbb16299e>; Kieran Rooney, "Fostering secrecy: Sate sits on report on carers' pay," *Herald Sun*, February 13, 2023, Victorian Parliamentary Library Database.

approximately 30,000 people in Central Victoria - round 17% of the region's population – who were struggling meet the financial demands of rising cost-of-living.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, in contrast to their metropolitan counterparts, regional carers often bear the additional burden of extensive travel to access critical services and supports, such as specialised therapies, allied healthcare, extracurricular activities, and educational resources for children in their care. As one regional carer explained in FCAV's 2018 discussion paper on carer issues, they struggled to gain reimbursement for the *"four hour round trip"* to swimming practice as it was *"not clear if these types of transport costs are covered by the care allowance."*<sup>32</sup>

The lack of readily available and easily accessible services in regional Victoria severely impacts the ability of foster carers to meet the complex needs of children in care. This gap in services not only increases the logistical burden on carers, who must travel long distances for essential services, but also exacerbates the financial strain they experience, as the costs associated with travel and missed work can accumulate quickly.

In recognition of these distinctly regional challenges, both South Australia and Queensland have introduced regional/remote loadings to their care allowance structures, which offer supplementary financial support to offset the higher costs associated with providing OOHC in a regional setting (e.g., geographic isolation, service gaps, higher retail costs, and increased travel demands).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Kimberly Price, "Cost of living tougher in regional Victoria as demand for services spikes," *ABC News*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-26/cost-of-living-tough-in-regional-victoria/101015938>.

<sup>32</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Carer Strategy: Carer Issues Discussion Paper*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Queensland Government, "Carer Allowances," Queensland Government, last modified May 22, 2024, <https://www.qld.gov.au/community/caring-child/foster-kinship-care/information-for-carers/money-matters/carers-allowances#regional-remote-loading>; Department for Child Protection, *Carer Payments (Family Based) Procedure*, (Adelaide, South Australia: Government of South Australia, July 2024), 7. <https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/research-and-publications/freedom-information/policy-documents/linked/Carer-Payments-Family-Based-Procedure-V3.6.pdf>.

In Queensland, the regional loading is paid fortnightly at 10% of the care allowance rate the carer receives; for example, a carer receiving the fortnightly base rate for a 0–5-year-old of \$611 would receive an additional \$61 each fortnight. At present it is provided to carers located in areas such as Cape York South, Mackay, Mount Isa and Gladstone.<sup>34</sup> Regionally focused policies such as this acknowledges the unique challenges of providing OOHC in regional settings, whilst also working to combat the acute financial impact that increased cost-of-living pressures commonly has on regional communities.

## 2.6 Financial Strain: Recommendations

### **Recommendation A – Increase the Care Allowance and Index for CPI**

This report recommends implementing changes proposed by FCAV and PCAF in their widely supported Care Allowance Campaign. It is essential to increase the foster carer allowance to reflect the impact of inflation and to align with that of states with similar OOHC numbers. The current allowance does not adequately cover the rising costs-of-living, leaving carers struggling to meet the needs of the children in their care, with many utilising their personal finances. A substantial increase in the Victorian care allowance across all levels would ensure greater financial stability for foster carers, reduce the impact of financial strain, and ultimately, help foster carers to continue providing essential care services to Victoria’s most vulnerable children.

Furthermore, in conjunction with increases in the fortnightly care allowance, the government should also implement an indexation mechanism based on CPI inflation to

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<sup>34</sup> Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services, *Child Safety Policy: Regional and remote loading for carers*, (Brisbane, Queensland: Queensland Government, 2018), 1.  
<https://www.dcssds.qld.gov.au/media/documents/foster-kinship-care/regional-remote-loading-carers-379.pdf>.

ensure that the care allowance remains responsive to economic changes, providing a sustainable and flexible financial foundation for carers.

### **Recommendation B - Regional Loading in Victoria**

The unique challenges faced by foster carers in regional Victoria necessitates the exploration of a regional loading system. Carers in these areas contend with heightened costs-of-living, increased travel demands, and limited access to essential services. Establishing a regional loading system would provide additional financial support to mitigate these challenges effectively.

Further investigation is recommended to ascertain the appropriate loading percentage and define qualifying geographical areas. In the two states utilised for this report's analysis – South Australia and Queensland – there are variations in the use of ABS classifications in the implementation of their regional/remote loading schemes. In South Australia, remote loading is only provided to carers located in areas classified by the ABS as remote or very remote, whereas Queensland's system includes areas from four different remoteness classifications: inner regional, outer regional, remote, and very remote.<sup>35</sup>

Victoria's regional geography consists of ABS classified inner-regional and outer-regional areas, with only two areas considered to be remote. Therefore, further research needs to be conducted into how a regional loading system can be most effectively tailored to the Victorian regional context.

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<sup>35</sup> Department for Child Protection, *Carer Payments (Family Based) Procedure, 7*; Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Data by region home - Region Summary: Queensland," Australian Bureau of Statistics, last modified 2023, <https://dbr.abs.gov.au/region.html?lyr=ste&rgn=3>.

## Chapter 3 – Culture and Systems Related Issues

### 3.1 Feeling Undervalued in the Foster Care System

Many foster carers feel underappreciated within the child protection system, often being perceived as “a service user”<sup>36</sup> rather than as essential contributors to a child’s care team. Although they provide daily care for vulnerable children, foster carers can be frequently excluded from important decision-making processes, with many feeling that their voices and opinions go unheard.<sup>37</sup> This exclusion disregards the unique insights that carers gain from daily interactions with the child in their care. As one Victorian carer stated in a 2018 Discussion Paper from FCAV:

*“[The Department] hold[s] professional meetings which never include me, yet I am the only one that really knows about the needs of the child.”<sup>38</sup>*

The themes of underappreciation and lack of recognition for foster carers’ expertise are recurrent in both sector-based and academic reviews on carer challenges. In a 2017 study on why carers decide to leave the system, Melanie Randle et al. found that many carers expressed frustration over child protection practitioners and department staff making decisions without their input.<sup>39</sup> In this review one carer expressed that there needs to be “acknowledgement that foster carers know the children better than department workers.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Carer Strategy: Carer Issues Discussion Paper*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Rapid Review: Foster Care Recruitment and Retention*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Carer Strategy: Carer Issues Discussion Paper*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Melanie Randle et al, “What makes foster carers think about quitting? Recommendations for improved retention of foster carers,” *Child & Family Social Work* 22, no. 3 (2017): 1183, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12334>.

<sup>40</sup> Randle et al, “What makes foster carers think about quitting? Recommendations for improved retention of foster carers,” 1183.

Whilst this is not the experience of every foster care, the large volume of carer responses that express feelings of undervaluation and exclusion within both sector-based and academic reviews points to a systemic cultural issue that has yet to be fully addressed. Despite the Victorian Government's *Strong Carers, Stronger Children* strategy committing to valuing and empowering carers under Goal 3, these concerns continue to persist.<sup>41</sup>

As volunteers, foster carers are not always acknowledged as integral members of the professional care team, creating a disconnection between the child protection sector and those providing OOHC. This disconnection not only impacts carer retention but also affects the quality of support given to children, as carers – who must manage complex emotional, educational, and health needs every day – feel sidelined in decisions about the children they closely support.

### 3.2 Fostering Wellbeing in Wales: A Model for Inclusive Care

The Fostering Wellbeing program in Wales offers a promising model for addressing the undervaluation and exclusion of foster carers within the child protection system. This program seeks to develop a more inclusive and respectful environment for carers and child protection practitioners alike, emphasising a consistent collaborative approach to child welfare.<sup>42</sup> The program has been discussed in both Australian and International reviews on foster carer retention strategies in recent years, including Victoria's CFECFW 2024 *Rapid Review* and the UK's Fostering Network 2023 *Foster Carer Retention and Recruitment* report.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, *Strong Carers, Stronger Children*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Bridget Handley and Alyson Rees, *Final Report: Evaluation of Fostering Wellbeing* (Cardiff, Wales: Cardiff University Centre for Trials Research and The Fostering Network Wales, July 2022), 9.  
<https://cascadewales.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/01/Fostering-Wellbeing-Evaluation-2022.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Rapid Review: Foster Care Recruitment and Retention*, 26; The Fostering Network, *Foster Carer Retention and Recruitment in England: Key Research Findings and*

A core component of Fostering Wellbeing is its social pedagogic approach to training for both carers and child protection practitioners.<sup>44</sup> This means that designated training sessions within the program are designed to encourage learning through regular social interaction and engagement between various stakeholders involved in the wider child protection system. Through online and in-person masterclasses and events, carers, agency workers, and government practitioners can collaboratively share experiences, build mutual understanding, and strengthen their collective skills to better support children in OOHC.

Bridget Handley and Alyson Rees' 2023 review of the program's effectiveness in Wales found that the inter-disciplinary nature of masterclasses proved to be one of the biggest positives for many attendees. Participants found that undertaking training with individuals from different areas of the child protection sector fostered a deeper understanding of each other's roles, as well as providing insight into the unique challenges and perspectives each role brings.<sup>45</sup> This review also noted that the purposeful inclusion of carers in this program and its training sessions helped child protection practitioners to better recognise foster carers as key components of the professional care team around a child. Following the Fostering Wellbeing training, one Welsh social worker noted that:

*"Everyone's got equal status in the relationships, and that includes foster carers and professionals."<sup>46</sup>*

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Recommendations (London, UK: May 2023), 12. <https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/Retention%20and%20recruitment%20report%20-%202024%20May%202023.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> Handley and Rees, *Final Report: Evaluation of Fostering Wellbeing*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Handley and Rees, *Final Report: Evaluation of Fostering Wellbeing*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Handley and Rees, *Final Report: Evaluation of Fostering Wellbeing*, 31.

## **Empowering Carers through Fostering Wellbeing**

Through this training, carers are empowered with tools and language to advocate confidently on behalf of the children they care for, addressing many of the frustrations with exclusion and lack of respect that carers often experience. Practitioners, on the other hand, are trained to actively include carers in decision-making processes, helping to ensure that their expertise is respected and utilised in developing child welfare care plans. This partnership model recognises the importance of all voices in the child protection system, helping to address systemic undervaluation.

### **3.3 Information Accessibility Challenges**

Alongside feelings of undervaluation, foster carers face significant challenges in accessing essential information, which directly impacts their ability to provide effective support. Carers rely on critical documentation – such as birth certificates, Medicare number, and Centrelink details – to access key services for children in their care. The Victorian Government’s establishment of the Care Support Help Desk in 2022 was a positive step towards reducing these delays by streamlining the retrieval of essential documents and alleviating some administrative burdens. However, many carers still report frequent delays and inconsistencies, causing a wealth of frustration.<sup>47</sup> When children transition between placements, or if they exit and re-enter the OOHC system, their key documentation does not always accompany them, forcing new carers to repeat the retrieval process.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care*, 147 and 149.

<sup>48</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Carer Strategy: Carer Issues Discussion Paper*, 21.

Moreover, the lack of an accessible and secure digital platform for foster carers further complicates these challenges. While child protection staff and agency workers have systems to store and track critical information, foster carers themselves are often left out of the loop.<sup>49</sup> Although privacy and security requirements necessitate controlled access, the development of a secure carer-friendly digital platform would significantly reduce information gaps and delays, allowing carers quicker access to essential information.

### 3.4 The Use of Digital Platforms in Queensland

Integrating digital technologies into child protection systems has shown considerable benefits by reducing the time, cost, and stress involved in accessing essential information for children in care.<sup>50</sup> Queensland's Carer Connect app is a successful example, providing foster carers with timely access to key details about the child in their care, including medical and educational records. In place since 2018, the Carer Connect app provides secure access to key information such as:

- The child protection placement agreement.
- Authority to care documentation.
- Medical information (e.g., immunisation records, existing health conditions, and medications).
- Current child safety contact information.
- Cultural safety information.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, "Timeline of Victorian government records that document wardship," Victorian State Government, last modified April 24, 2019, <https://www.findingrecords.dhhs.vic.gov.au/faqs/timeline-government-records>; Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, "For Funded Agencies," Victorian State Government, last modified March 25, 2022, <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/client-relationship-management>.

<sup>50</sup> Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Carer Strategy: Carer Issues Discussion Paper*, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Queensland Government, "Carer Connect," Queensland Government, last modified September 26, 2023, <https://www.qld.gov.au/community/caring-child/foster-kinship-care/information-for-carers/carers-connect>.

Foster carers are also able to contribute to this app by sharing information about the child in their care, such as their likes, hobbies, and their routines. Additionally, carers have their own profiles which child protection practitioners can use to help a child become accustomed with their new carers prior to placement commencement.<sup>52</sup>

### **Victoria's Caring Life App**

Victoria's existing Caring Life app, currently used as a digital memory book to store videos and photos for children in care, lacks similar functionality for storing and sharing essential documentation with carers.<sup>53</sup> Expanding this app or developing an additional platform like Carer Connect to coincide with Caring Life would streamline access to critical documents, improving carer's experiences and ability to provide high quality care.

## **3.5 Culture and Systems Based Issues: Recommendations**

### **Recommendation C – Foster Carer Inclusion Training Program**

This report recommends the development of a joint training program in Victoria, modelled on the Fostering Wellbeing initiative in Wales. This program would offer in-person and online sessions focused on communication, collaboration and advocacy skills, enabling carers to participate more effectively in care management systems. The ultimate purpose of a program like this would be to enhance the collaboration and understanding between foster carers and child protection practitioners.

By providing clear guidelines on teamwork and respectful communication, the program would empower carers and ensure their insights are valued in decision-making

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<sup>52</sup> Queensland Government, "Carer Connect."

<sup>53</sup> Caring Life, 'About Caring Life: Connecting the Lives of Children in Care,' Caring Life, last modified 2024, <https://about.caringlife.com/>; Foster Care Association of Victoria, "Caring Life App Launched," Foster Care Association of Victoria, last modified June 26, 2020, <https://www.fcav.org.au/news/caringlife-app-launch>.

processes. This initiative would help address systemic undervaluation of carers, improve retention, and strengthen outcomes for children in care by fostering a consistent collaborative approach across Victoria's child protection services.

### **Recommendation D – Improved Information Access via Digital Platforms**

Building on the example of Queensland's Carer Connect app, this report recommends the expansion of Victoria's Caring Life app to include key child-related documentation, such as medical records, placement agreements, immunisation history, and legal documents, to significantly improve information access for foster carers. Centralising this information in one secure carer-friendly platform would empower carers to better manage their child's needs and facilitate a smoother coordination with other service providers. This change would also address concerns raised by carers, as highlighted in the FCAV Carer Strategy and other reports, about being excluded from decision-making and lacking the information necessary to effectively support children in OOHC.

## Chapter 4 – Access to Support for Foster Carers

### 4.1 Challenges in Accessing Formal and Informal Supports

Foster carers, particularly in regional areas, often experience isolation due to limited access to both formal and informal support networks. The absence of easily accessible respite care options and peer networks can contribute to feelings of loneliness and overwhelm, especially when carers have little opportunity to connect with others who understand the demands of the role.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, due to emotional and psychological needs of children in care, as well as their complex trauma histories, many foster carers are hesitant to utilise respite care if the provider is not well-known to the child.<sup>55</sup> This is a particularly pressing issue for regional foster carers, as the scarcity of registered and available respite providers in Victoria's regions often means children must be separated from their immediate community for a carer to access respite. This gap in support significantly contributes to carer burnout, with many carers facing exhaustion without regular breaks or peer support. The lack of a robust and easily accessible support system ultimately affects the wellbeing of carers and the stability of the children in their care, leading to higher attrition rates.

### 4.2 The Mockingbird Family Model

The Mockingbird Family Model, developed in Washington in the early 2000s, is a transformative approach to foster care that organises families into constellations

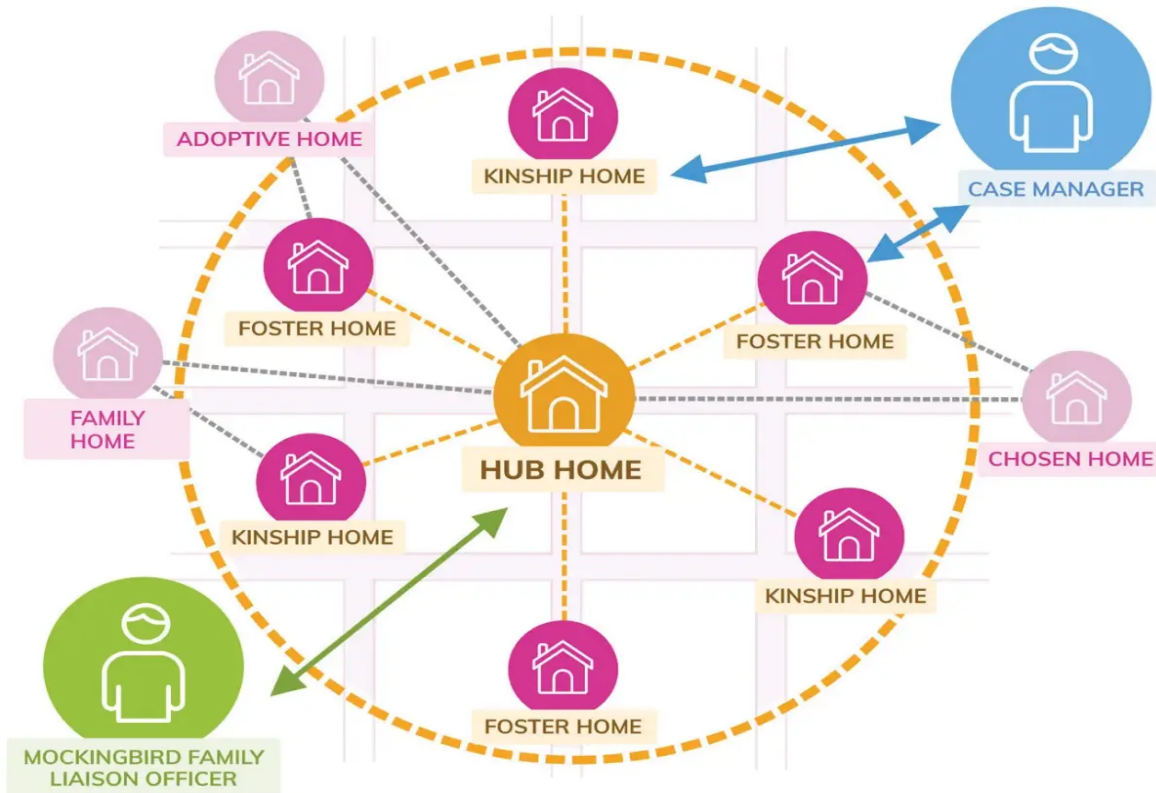
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<sup>54</sup> The Fostering Network, *Foster Carer Retention and Recruitment in England: Key Research Findings and Recommendations*, 11; Mia Gowan et al., "An exploration of the self-care practices of foster carers in Australia," *Adoption & Fostering* 47, no. 2 (2023): 200, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759231178034>.

<sup>55</sup> Gowan et al., "An exploration of the self-care practices of foster carers in Australia," 200.

designed to provide support like an extended family network.<sup>56</sup> Each constellation consists of a hub home carer, who is a highly experienced OOHC provider, and 6-10 carer households.<sup>57</sup> These households are predominantly foster carers but can also be kinship and permanent carers. The below figure provides a visual representation of the various social connections in a typical Mockingbird constellation.

**Figure 1: Example of Mockingbird Constellation**



Source: Life Without Barriers.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Rebecca Goodvin and M. Miller, *Evaluation of the foster care hub home model: Outcome evaluation* (Olympia, Washington: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, December 2017), 1.

[https://www.wsipp.wa.gov/ReportFile/1679/Wsipp\\_Evaluation-of-the-Foster-Care-Hub-Home-Model-Outcome-Evaluation\\_Report.pdf](https://www.wsipp.wa.gov/ReportFile/1679/Wsipp_Evaluation-of-the-Foster-Care-Hub-Home-Model-Outcome-Evaluation_Report.pdf); Helen McLaren et al., “Keeping Siblings in Care Connected: Improving Relationship Stability via the Mockingbird Family Model,” *Australian Social Work* 77, no. 4 (2024): 487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2024.2347618>.

<sup>57</sup> Emi Patmisari, Helen McLaren and Michelle Jones, “Reconsidering Recognition in the Lives of Children and Young People in Care: Insights from the Mockingbird Family in South Australia,” *Social Sciences* 13, no. 2 (2024): 4, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13020081>; Daniella Pope and Jarrod Whittaker, “Victorian foster care model boosting support to parents and children,” ABC News, September 13, 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-13/mockingbird-foster-program-building-support-gippsland-vic/104341424>.

<sup>58</sup> Life Without Barriers, “Mockingbird Family,” Life Without Barriers, last modified 2024, <https://www.lwb.org.au/our-approach/child-youth-and-family/mockingbird-family/>.

## **Benefits of the Mockingbird Family Model for Carer and Child in OOHC**

One of the key benefits of this model relates to the positive impact that hub home carers can have on foster caring experiences. This experienced carer – who is commonly paid for their services - provides essential support to carer households through training, organising regular social gatherings, and offering both planned and emergency respite care.<sup>59</sup> Acting as a key point of contact for guidance, emotional support, and resources, the hub home carer provides carers with both formal and informal structures to support them in sustaining their caregiving role. Moreover, as opposed to agency workers or child protection practitioners, hub home carers are designed to provide 24/7 support to the households in their constellation, meaning carers can easily access quick and effective support in times of need.<sup>60</sup>

Another key benefit of Mockingbird is its ability to foster essential connections for both carers and children. This model enables both children and carers to form deep, meaningful relationships that would have been much more difficult to establish outside of Mockingbird.<sup>61</sup> This is especially crucial for children in OOHC, many of whom have lost close connections with their biological families or experienced placement disruptions making their ability to maintain a stable group of friends challenging.

Since all members of the constellation are approved care providers by child protection services, children can more readily enjoy typical childhood experiences like sleepovers and spontaneous playdates. This can also mean that foster carers are able to provide essential informal supports for each other such as babysitting and school carpooling, as

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<sup>59</sup> Goodvin and M. Miller, *Evaluation of the foster care hub home model: Outcome evaluation*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Michelle Jones et al., "Exploring social networks in foster caring: The mockingbird family in Australia," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 41, no. 7 (2024): 1871, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075241230455>.

<sup>61</sup> McLaren et al., "Keeping Siblings in Care Connected: Improving Relationship Stability via the Mockingbird Family Model," 487.

well as providing advice and sharing experiences. The strong relationships formed within Mockingbird constellations also means foster carers are more likely to utilise formalised supports such as respite care. One Australian carer said that the members of their constellation:

*“Feel a lot more comfortable knowing that we can send our children out to people that they already know.”<sup>62</sup>*

### 4.3 Mockingbird Family Model in Action

#### International Examples

The Mockingbird Family Model has gained substantial traction internationally, with constellations and partnerships in Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, as highlighted in the Mockingbird Society’s 2024 *Advocacy Report*.<sup>63</sup> Recently in the US, the program achieved a remarkable 91% carer retention rate across Washington’s 11 constellations, underscoring its success in supporting foster carers to maintain their caregiving role.<sup>64</sup>

In the United Kingdom, the 2022 *Mockingbird Impact Report* by The Fostering Network demonstrated the model’s positive impact on placement stability and carer retention rates across England. With 89 active constellations in 2022, UK child protection authorities observed that the Mockingbird model’s structured and built-in supports

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<sup>62</sup> Helen McLaren et al., “Piloting the Mockingbird Family in Australia: Experiences of foster carers and agency workers,” *Child & Family Social Work* 29, no. 2 (2024): 416, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13095>.

<sup>63</sup> Mockingbird Society, *Advocacy Report: April 2023-March 2024* (Seattle, Washington: April 2024), 2. [https://mockingbirdsociety.org/images/PDFs%20May%202024/2023-2024%20Advocacy%20Report\\_FINAL%201.pdf](https://mockingbirdsociety.org/images/PDFs%20May%202024/2023-2024%20Advocacy%20Report_FINAL%201.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> Mockingbird Society, *Advocacy Report: April 2023-March 2024*, 2.

helped prevent 382 placement breakdowns.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, 9% of carer interviewed for the review indicated that would have left fostering without this model's support.<sup>66</sup>

### **Constellations in New South Wales and South Australia**

Introduced in South Australia and New South Wales in 2019, Mockingbird is already showing promise in Australia's OOHC system. The constellation structure and the hub home carer help to reduce the isolation that carers often face, especially in Australia's regional areas where access to both formal and informal supports is scarce.

Whilst Mockingbird is still in its infancy in Australia, meaning there is limited long-term data, there has been some initial academic research into the effectiveness of this program in the Australian context. Most notably in 2024, Helen McLaren, Emi Patmisari and Michelle Jones released a qualitative comparative study between the experiences of Mockingbird carers and carers outside of this program. They noted that many Mockingbird carers, having previously experienced OOHC outside of this program, could clearly recognise the increased support provided by Mockingbird. One carer said that they *"feel so much more supported"*<sup>67</sup> compared to how they felt providing OOHC outside of the Mockingbird constellation. This study also highlighted that many Mockingbird carers felt the constellation and hub home carer setup more accurately reflected the realities of 24/7 caregiving, offering more effective, timely, and responsive support to both carers and children.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The Fostering Network, *Mockingbird Impact Report 2022* (London, UK: 2022), 12.

[https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/Mockingbird%20Impact%20Report\\_2022.pdf](https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/Mockingbird%20Impact%20Report_2022.pdf).

<sup>66</sup> The Fostering Network, *Mockingbird Impact Report 2022*, 12.

<sup>67</sup> Helen McLaren, Emi Patmisari, and Michelle Jones, "Professional quality of life of Australian Mockingbird Family foster carers: Compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress," *Children and Youth Services Review* 158 (2024): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.107453>.

<sup>68</sup> McLaren, Patmisari, and Jones, "Professional quality of life of Australian Mockingbird Family foster carers: Compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress," 7.

## **Pilots in Victoria**

Mockingbird is currently being trialled in Victoria, with Anglicare Victoria and Life Without Barriers leading its rollout in regional areas like Gippsland, Goulburn, Bendigo, and the Ovens Murray region.<sup>69</sup> These pilots aim to address support gaps in regional Victoria, where services and peer networks are often limited compared to metropolitan areas. These trials provide an opportunity to evaluate the model's effectiveness in building community, reducing isolation, and strengthening support for both carers and children.

Unfortunately, due to ethical constraints and strict security measures, obtaining in-depth and specific data regarding current Mockingbird trials in Victoria falls outside of the scope of this report. However, future research in this area should prioritise acquiring such data to gain a clearer picture of the direct impact Mockingbird has had on carer satisfaction, retention and placement stability in Victoria's pilot programs.

### **4.4 Access to Support for Foster Carers: Recommendations**

#### **Recommendation E – State Sponsored Roll-Out of Mockingbird Across Victoria**

Building on the promising results from Australia's initial Mockingbird pilots, there is a compelling case for the Victorian Government to facilitate a state-wide roll-out of this program. Initial phases of implementation should continue in key regional areas, especially towns located in Victoria's central and northern regions, such as Seymour,

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<sup>69</sup> Pope and Whittaker, "Victorian foster care model boosting support to parents and children"; Life Without Barriers, "Mockingbird Family Victoria," Life Without Barriers, last modified 2024, <https://www.lwb.org.au/campaign/mockingbird-family-in-goulburn-and-ovens-murray/>; Anglicare Victoria, "Victoria's first foster care 'constellation' in Bendigo 'a real game changer'," Anglicare Victoria, last modified 2024, <https://www.anglicarevic.org.au/news/victorias-first-foster-care-constellation-in-bendigo-a-real-game-changer/>.

Benalla, Shepparton, and Echuca. These areas are some of the most densely populated in regional Victoria, offering an ideal starting off point for a program that benefits from geographical proximity among carer households.

This report also recommends further investigation into the most effective approach for developing a secondary implementation phase in less populated regions of Victoria. Given the model's reliance on some level of geographic closeness, additional research is needed to tailor this approach to best meet the needs of carers living in Victoria's outer regional areas.

Currently, only Anglicare Victoria and Life Without Barriers hold licenses to deliver the Mockingbird system of care. To broaden the reach of the roll-out, the Victorian Government must invest in developing a centralised, state-sponsored program that supports additional agencies in acquiring the necessary training and licensing. By providing the relevant training in a centralised way, it will be easier for the DFFH to monitor the progression of each care agency in their process of gaining Mockingbird licensing.

State-wide access to the Mockingbird Family Model would benefit existing foster carers and encourage those in part-time, emergency, or respite roles to transition to full-time caregiving.<sup>70</sup> The model's constellation framework provides structured support networks, offering carers the emotional and practical resources they need to maintain their roles sustainability, reducing burnout and attrition.

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<sup>70</sup> McLaren et al, "Keeping Siblings in Care Connected: Improving Relationship Stability via the Mockingbird Family Model," 491.

## Conclusion

If left unaddressed, the above challenges impacting foster carers will continue to increase attrition rates, fundamentally destabilising Victoria's OOHC system. The inability of current policies and programs to maintain strong carer retention rates has already had an impact on placement availability, as more children are being forced to enter residential care.

Recent years have demonstrated a trend of foster carers exiting the system due to financial strain, as current compensation fails to cover the true costs of caregiving. Additionally, carers often feel undervalued, with child protection practitioners neglecting to acknowledge the specific expertise gained from providing daily care for a child. Many carers also lack easily accessible formal support services and informal networks, leaving them without adequate resources to navigate the challenges of foster caregiving.

This issue is particularly pronounced in regional areas, where carers face unique difficulties, yet are overlooked by policies often tailored for metropolitan contexts. The absence of targeted support and resources for regional foster carers further exacerbates their isolation and hinders their capacity to continue in this role.

The analysis and recommendations outlined in this report provide clear insight into strategies and approaches that can be utilised to combat these issues. Addressing these barriers with policies specifically focused on foster carers, and where possible regional carers, is critical to retaining a stable and effective foster care workforce, ensuring that all Victorian children in need receive the support and stability they deserve.

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