

# Carer Advisory Groups

## Terms of Reference

### Background

Carer Advisory Groups are a collaborative and interagency forum; bringing together carers, carer representatives and staff from community service organisations, the Foster Care Association of Victoria and the Department of Health and Human Services (the department) to improve communication and foster service improvements in out-of-home care.

Foster and kinship carers are at the centre of change for some of our most vulnerable children and young people. In order to improve quality outcomes for children and young people in home based care and allow for better placement stability, it is critical that carers participate in decision making and development opportunities.

The contribution of carers is invaluable and the effectiveness of the Carer Advisory Group is due to the generosity of carers in volunteering their time and effort.

### Objectives

Carer Advisory Groups are a model of carer engagement. Set at the divisional level, the groups will allow for a more localised focus, embedding carer participation into localised service improvements and ensuring carers' voices are heard by those delivering services in their area.

The main goals of the Carer Advisory Groups are to:

- Develop a shared understanding of common issues facing carers and to prioritise such issues and develop, action and monitor progress to resolve issues where appropriate.
- Improve communication between various parties involved in the care of vulnerable children and young people by providing a forum for a structured dialogue for carers to offer feedback and raise issues on policies, protocols and practice.
- Provide a collaborative setting to strengthen home based care with a focus on carer support, training and retention.
- Provide a localised setting to work together to identify issues and opportunities to achieve better outcomes for children and young people in care and for continual improvement in the delivery of out-of-home care in Victoria.
- Provide advice to inform the out-of-home care reform agenda.

### Membership

The Carer Advisory Group will comprise of foster carers, kinship carers, Foster Care Association Victoria and Kinship Carers Victoria, community service organisation representatives, Aboriginal community-controlled organisation representatives and department representatives including senior Child Protection and Client Outcomes and Service Improvement representatives.

A senior divisional department representative will chair the Carer Advisory Group and a carer co- chair will be selected by the group. Membership will be for an initial 18 month period. Groups will be broadly representative of



carers from respective department divisions to reflect the diversity of carers and care types with consideration for the size and capacity of the group and the constraints of operating effectively. If necessary, members will be replaced via a smaller localised expression of interest (EOI) process, or a person may be selected from the existing pool of interested carers.

## **Carer Advisory Groups Membership Selection**

An expression of interest process determines membership of the Carer Advisory Groups. Interested carers have the opportunity to apply to become a member of the Carer Advisory Group. The selection panel is made up of Foster Care Association of Victoria and department divisional staff. Department and community service organisation representatives will be nominated based on their relevant role, ability to identify, inform and resolve issues and with authority to represent the department in such matters.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

### **All Carer Advisory Group Members' roles**

- Discuss emerging issues relating to carer support, training, advocacy and recruitment, with a localised lens and refrain from raising individual issues or cases at meetings that could be better addressed via direct conversation between the community service organisation, department and carer.
- Participate in consultation initiated by key out-of-home care stakeholders.
- Provide feedback and advice on reforms, legislation and/or policy impacting on children and young people, with the carer's perspective.
- Review and provide feedback about relevant resources and materials as required.
- Identify and promote good practice in carer support.
- Seek the chairperson's agreement to represent the group at public forums, meetings, conferences and in the media.

### **Chairpersons' role and Co-chairpersons roles**

- Chairperson and co-chairperson's are responsible for convening and chairing meetings.
- They prepare the meeting agenda including seeking input into the agenda from group members.
- They are to ensure meetings are run purposefully and efficiently in accordance with the agenda and all members are treated with courtesy and respect.
- They are required to organise minutes to be taken and distributed within two weeks following a meeting. Minutes to include an action list.

### **Divisional Secretariat role**

- To ensure that actions from the meetings are followed up in preparation for the next meeting.
- Engage with other CAG secretariats to share actions and coordinate ideas for actions and carer improvements
- Prepare and seek co-chair endorsement of the Quarterly Update and provide to DHHS central out-of-home care unit to consolidate and circulate to peak organisations.
- Ensure a copy of the minutes is provided to the department's central office.
- Discuss and confirm with CAG Chair and carer Co-chair the state-wide issues to be raised with central Out-of-Home Care unit.
- As necessary, communicate any specific or divisional issues to other stakeholders to improve practice and /or recognise identified good practice.

# Meeting protocols

## Format

The Department will ensure that it prioritises the convenience of foster carers in all aspects of the convening of meetings and will accommodate the needs of carers as the paramount concern.

Meetings will follow an agenda, be conducted in a timely manner and be as flexible as possible to achieve the objectives of the Carer Advisory Group.

## Meeting agenda

The meeting agenda and supporting materials will be distributed prior to each meeting to ensure each meeting has a purpose and stays focused; that members are prepared for the meeting and to encourage member participation. Agenda items will have a time limit to ensure all items are covered and meetings don't run overtime. Members will have the opportunity to propose agenda items prior to the meeting and items not discussed can be noted and placed on the agenda for the next meeting.

## Meeting minutes and actions

Minutes will be taken at each meeting to record discussion items, actions, responsibility for actions and deadlines for actions.

At the beginning of each meeting, the co-chairs will:

- Ask members to approve the minutes from the previous meeting.
- Seek an update on the action items from the previous meeting.

The minutes should be written up and distributed to participants in a timely manner. Quick action reinforces the importance of the meeting and reduces errors of memory. Any unfinished business on the agenda is to be noted in the minutes and added to the agenda for the next meeting.

## Frequency of meetings

Meetings will be held quarterly. Additional meetings and/or events may be agreed to by Carer Advisory Group members with consideration about the practical challenges of distance, travel, time and availability.

## Attendance

Wherever possible, members are to notify the Chair as soon as possible if they are unable to attend a meeting. If a member has not attended more than three meetings in a year without notification, the Chair will make contact with that member to identify if the member needs support to enable them to resume attending meetings, or to discuss their future role on the Carer Advisory Group. It is recommended that participation on the Carer Advisory Group by carers be recognised as a learning and development opportunity.

## Confidentiality

Most issues relating to the Carer Advisory Groups will be open and can be discussed with other stakeholders. The co-chairs will clearly identify instances when discussions or information provided to the Carer Advisory Groups are confidential and members will need to refrain from discussing or disclosing this information to anyone not on the Carer Advisory Groups.

## Secretariat

It is recommended this task be led by the division and supported by Carer Advisory Group members in partnership with the department.

## Expenses

Carer members of the Carer Advisory Group are volunteers and unpaid for their contribution. In recognition of this, where a carer is required to travel distance, then travel may be claimed and reimbursed by either the department's central office or division.