FOSTER CARE DESIGN PROJECT
STAKEHOLDER STUDY

Our Foster Care Design Project reflects our commitment to develop a world class, evidence-based foster and kinship care program. We are currently considering a range of initiatives designed to strengthen the development of supported, knowledgeable carers and employees who are focused on the needs and outcomes of children.

To guide our work in this area we have drawn on extensive evidence-based research and sought the advice of subject matter expert Judy Sebba (Director of the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education at Oxford University). This allowed us to identify and focus our work on four key areas of practice development.

We were interested in understanding the views of all stakeholders involved in foster and kinship care so conducted a series of focus groups and surveys to capture feedback on key design elements from carers (192), families (26), LWB employees (156) and young people in care (25). Engaging children and young people in this study proved challenging. We will continue to develop ways to incorporate the voice of young people in our work.

WHAT WE HEARD

The foster care system is under stress due to a limited pool of carers and respite options, high demands for administrative accountability, inconsistent case worker support and varying levels of practical support for children, young people, carers and families.

This is resulting in carer burnout or fluctuating capacity, decreased professional satisfaction, inappropriate placements and a negative impact on outcomes for children and young people.

THE OPPORTUNITY

- There is a genuine passion for growing healthy, grounded, successful children and young people.
- A sense of belonging is essential to build the trust and environment that supports great care outcomes.
- Relationships are the fulcrum of successful care.
- Consistency and transparency are central planks of any working relationship.
- Active involvement of carers as members of the care team is vigorously supported by all stakeholders.
- Relief of tension between personal hopes and dreams and the objective realities of a statutory system.

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<tr>
<th>ASPIRATION</th>
<th>VS</th>
<th>REALITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Permanent care – ‘forever families’</td>
<td>vs</td>
<td>Placement changes and closure at 18 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dignity of risk-taking</td>
<td>vs</td>
<td>Statutory and organisational cultures of risk aversion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Just like one of your own kids</td>
<td>vs</td>
<td>Same but different</td>
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FOCUS AREA 1
CARER ATTRACTION & ENGAGEMENT

WHAT WE HEARD

- We need to attract carers motivated by altruistic factors (such as helping a child succeed in life, having the time and energy to help a child, wanting to play a part in the community).
- The internet is viewed as a contemporary means of connecting with prospective carers and is an efficient means of first round screening.
- Sharing the lived experiences of carers is considered a powerful means of recruitment and early self-selection.

OUR STUDY REVEALED...

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<th>INITIATIVES WE ARE CONSIDERING</th>
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<tr>
<td>Developing an online self-assessment tool / quiz for potential carers</td>
<td>89% of carers and LWB staff agreed this would be useful.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increasing carer involvement in the recruitment of new carers</td>
<td>82% of staff support this idea. Carers were consistently positive about the potential to share their lived experience in the recruitment of new carers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using word of mouth and community engagement initiatives as recruitment strategies</td>
<td>90% of staff agree. 30% of carers indicated that a personal connection or referral was the basis of selecting LWB.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introducing webchat to the LWB website to allow potential carers to communicate in real time</td>
<td>Only 8% of carers felt that webchat would be helpful to assist in early self-selection. Initiative now under review.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introducing enquiry management stages: potential carers not yet ready to commit to full application</td>
<td>There is support to strengthen the contact points for people making enquiries. 60% of carers indicated that regular contact with LWB maintained their interest, with local support and training delivery (where relevant) also important factors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introducing special roles to attract and engage with potential carers in local communities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adopting innovative IT solutions for inquiry management.</td>
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<td>Enabling information sessions /exchanges to occur in person or online.</td>
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<td>Targeted questioning to support screening of potential sexual offender.</td>
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<td>Introducing an exit survey when an enquirer does not proceed so we can continue to improve our approach.</td>
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INITIATIVES WE ARE CONSIDERING

- Developing an online self-assessment tool / quiz for potential carers
- Increasing carer involvement in the recruitment of new carers
- Using word of mouth and community engagement initiatives as recruitment strategies
- Introducing webchat to the LWB website to allow potential carers to communicate in real time
- Introducing enquiry management stages:
  - potential carers not yet ready to commit to full application
  - caring may not be a good fit but may be better involved as a volunteer or LWB employee in another role

77% of carers became foster carers to help a child succeed in life.
40% of carers selected LWB because of an existing relationship with a LWB staff member, carer or knowledge of LWB through referral by the department or through other work in the sector.
15% of carers indicated that advertising, events and social media were the main generator of enquiries.

SOME BEST PRACTICE INITIATIVES WE HAVE ALREADY PLANNED OR STARTED

- Introducing specialist roles to attract and engage with potential carers in local communities.
- Adopting innovative IT solutions for enquiry management.
- Enabling information sessions /exchanges to occur in person or online.
- Targeted questioning to support screening of potential sexual offender.
- Introducing an exit survey when an enquirer does not proceed so we can continue to improve our approach.

WE ARE IMAGINATIVE

Carers are the linchpin of a successful foster care placement ... ultimately the success of children and young people depends on them.
LWB staff member
FOCUS AREA 2
CARER ASSESSMENT, APPROVAL & REVIEW

WHAT WE HEARD

- The outcomes for children and young people improve where they are well matched with families who are skilled, confident and resilient.
- To target the ‘right’ people we need to acknowledge that attitudes and personal attributes are more important than knowledge or skills.
- Ongoing contact with LWB and access to training during the engagement and assessment process is critical.

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<td>Developing and maintaining a list of endorsed assessment resources</td>
<td>Utilising a combination of professional judgement and assessment tools was strongly supported. ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing job and role changes by introducing specialist assessors, structured support for generalist assessors, degree qualifications as an employment prerequisite and assessment KPIs</td>
<td>There is support for specialised roles to strengthen knowledge and skill and to avoid some unintended consequences that can arise when recruitment and assessment functions are performed by the same person. ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introducing structured learning and development for LWB assessors and a national assessment Help Desk function</td>
<td>The importance of professional judgement (rated by 60% of LWB staff as the most effective assessment tool) supports the need for ongoing development and support for people performing this function. ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing the involvement of family members and children in carer assessments</td>
<td>Family members and children both said they wanted to be involved in carer assessments and choosing carers. Family members felt children should have a greater say. ✓</td>
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实施一个关系性、优势为基础的方法来由有专门技能和知识的人对看护者进行评估和批准。

60% of carers indicated they continued with their assessment because of regular communication with LWB.

60% of staff believe professional judgement is the most effective carer assessment tool.

70% of LWB staff supported the view that attitude and personal attributes are more important than knowledge and skills which can be learned during the caring journey.

SOME BEST PRACTICE INITIATIVES WE HAVE ALREADY PLANNED OR STARTED

✓ Understanding the required assessment, review and approval processes in each state and mapping to a corporate approach.
✓ Exploring culturally-appropriate assessment approaches, including a Winangay pilot.
✓ Involving children in the assessment process.
✓ Utilising external assessors only in specific circumstances.

“We are entrusting the lives of vulnerable children with those we assess as capable.”

LWB staff member

WE ARE RESPECTFUL
FOCUS AREA 3
CARER LEARNING PATHWAYS

WHAT WE HEARD

- There are mixed perspectives on how well carers are trained in preparation for their role in foster care.
- Access to learning continues to be a challenge. Short notice, time constraints, scheduling and access to child care can limit availability for training.
- Understanding the statutory foster care system and developing an understanding of LWB expectations and ways of working are significant learning challenges for carers.

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<td>Facilitating access to learning pathways for existing non relative and kinship carers</td>
<td>Both kinship and non-relative carers indicated support for increased access to learning. Family members also want carers to have trauma-informed training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introducing learning mentors and journals for new carers</td>
<td>The majority of carers indicated that mentoring by another person, or one-to-one training are two of the most effective learning methods. Online learning and traditional group learning are also highly regarded. 72% of carers viewed on-line learning as appealing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including carers as part of the training team</td>
<td>Carers indicated interest and willingness to be more involved in the operational aspects of foster care and viewed training involvement as the opportunity to share lived experience. Staff support an increased role for carers where there is a clear pathway of selection, development and support for this function.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing relationships between family members and carers</td>
<td>Family members are keen to meet, share information and have relationships with carers. The 'Building Better Relationships' workshop is being piloted to support this initiative.</td>
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I would love to participate in the training of new carers as I think the new carer training doesn’t prepare them enough for the reality.
Carer

50%
- 50% of carers indicated they would be ready to access e-learning when it becomes available.

60%
- 60% of carers indicated that self-paced learning is their preferred learning style.

87%
- 87% of staff agree it would be valuable for existing carers to mentor less experienced carers.

SOME BEST PRACTICE INITIATIVES WE HAVE ALREADY PLANNED OR STARTED

- Reviewing the range of carer materials within LWB and external and proposing a learning pathway based on what works.
- Extending CARE and trauma-informed training to carers and the broader care team.
- Working with People Safety and Culture to develop a learning management system for employees and carers.
- Developing approaches to involve carers as learning mentors.

WE ARE RESPONSIVE
FOCUS AREA 4
CARER SUPPORT & SUPERVISION

WHAT WE HEARD

- There is strong support for a more cohesive sense of ‘care team’ that involves carers.
- Views about the role of the child’s family as part of the care picture vary but many factors were identified as potentially helpful in the development of a more inclusive care model.
- Carers and young people voiced serious concerns where they felt a carer was motivated by money.
- Staff turnover and increased administrative processes are negative influences in the care experience.

55% of carers indicated that the most valuable attribute of a support worker is ‘understanding the context and needs of the family’.

40% of carers valued equally the ‘personality’ and ‘skills’ of a support worker as desirable characteristics.

75% of carers reported needing mental health services for a child in their care.

OUR STUDY REVEALED...

| INITIATIVES WE ARE CONSIDERING | 80% of carers support the idea of hub for training and 70% for social and peer support. The majority of carers are also open to establishing online groups and networks. | ✓ |
| Implementing the LWB supervision policy with carers, including monthly supervision meetings. | 72% of staff agree. 23% of staff are unsure and would like to ensure this reflects a strengths based approach. | ✓ |
| Increasing interaction and involvement with child’s parents, siblings, other family or community | Opinions varied but there was consensus about the value and importance of family connection and the role that carers can play in supporting this. | ✓ |
| Improving clinical support for carers | Carers and families shared the view that trauma informed practice should be foundation training for all care team members. Carers indicated accessing advice for complex behaviour and support for mental health can be difficult. | ✓ |
| Implementing a child-focused approach to short break care/respite | Views vary about the realistic expectation of respite, who it benefits and how it fits within the context of family life. General agreement that respite is best configured to be regular, routine and normalised for children. | ✓ |

INITIATIVES WE ARE CONSIDERING

Introducing peer mentoring and support, and establishing a carer hub for training and peer support

Implementing the LWB supervision policy with carers, including monthly supervision meetings.

Increasing interaction and involvement with child’s parents, siblings, other family or community

Improving clinical support for carers

Implementing a child-focused approach to short break care/respite

SOME BEST PRACTICE INITIATIVES WE HAVE ALREADY PLANNED OR STARTED

✓ Making better use of technology to streamline administrative processes for children and young people in care.
✓ Improving access to digital information for carers (e.g. carer intranet and app).
✓ Establishing a framework to provide allegation support for carers.

Trauma is a very real event for children being taken from their family.
LWB staff member
YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US

What’s most important for you when you leave care?

Having someone to love me.

ABOUT THE IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF GOOD CARE

- make sure every child is happy and heard
- listen first
- teach kids to make good decisions
- prepare kids for independence
- tell the truth and do what you say you’re going to do – only make promises that can be kept

THEIR BIGGEST FRUSTRATIONS RELATE TO

- being held on a leash – not having the same freedom as every other kid
- changing placements – changing schools – getting questions all the time – being bullied
- not getting a good education
- when workers don’t have a relationship with a kid or won’t be straight with them
- when workers promise one thing and then have to change it
- being different

FAMILIES TOLD US

If parents and foster carers have a good relationship … it’s easier for kids to have their own relationship with parents and foster carers.

THAT PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- Often feel judged, excluded and unsupported
- Want to support the care of their children in partnership with carers
- Are seeking more relaxed and natural relationships with their children
- See a significant power imbalance between themselves, carers and caseworkers
- Indicated that kinship care is not always better for children for several reasons including the quality of care. Kinship care arrangements, especially when made without involvement of parents, children and family, can have a negative impact on relationships.
- Perceive the casework role as crucial and often had limited or no contact with them
- See conventional supervised family contact arrangements as a barrier to family engagement

PARENTS AND FAMILIES SHOWED SUPPORT FOR

- LWB approach to carer learning and development
- LWB ideas regarding carer attributes, qualities and assessment
- A family inclusive approach to foster care that has the strengthening of family relationships as one of its primary goals

WE ARE COURAGEOUS

Visit our website for contact details for your local region. www.lwb.org.au               @lwbaustralia               LWBAustralia
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