

Submission: Enhancing Support and Outcomes for Children in Care

1. Payments

Payments

The financial out-of-pocket costs for children in care are excessive and unsustainable. I propose a **200% increase in all payments** to reflect the true costs of raising children in out-of-home care.

Carers are not only providing day-to-day care but covering extraordinary, ongoing expenses that are rarely reimbursed in full or in a timely manner. In my own case, I estimate I have personally absorbed between **\$300,000 – \$400,000** over the 18 years I have fostered please find attached my budget for two of my current placements . This level of financial sacrifice is not reasonable, nor is it sustainable if we want to retain committed carers in the system.

Consider the practical costs:

- **Healthcare:** A single dental treatment can take months of paperwork, 50 phone calls, and countless emails before approval. In the meantime, the bill has to be paid by the carer.
- **Education:** School uniforms, excursions, tutoring, and extracurricular activities are often either underfunded or not funded at all.
- **Everyday living:** The rising cost of groceries, fuel, clothing, and utilities hits carers harder because we are often supporting larger families than most.

On top of this, carers who receive **CSNA or HSNA** payments are required to resubmit justification every year. This process is not only time-consuming but **belittling**—forcing carers to re-prove the needs of children whose situations have not changed. It places unnecessary stress on carers who are already stretched emotionally and financially.

The reality is that many carers simply **do not ask for reimbursements**, because the process is so degrading and exhausting. This means the department benefits financially from carers' silence, while carers are left footing the bill.

Proposed solutions:

1. **200% increase in all base payments**, indexed annually to cost-of-living increases. with a following increase as per the cost of living per year of 7%
2. **Streamlined medical and essential expense reimbursement process**, with maximum 14-day turnaround. This needs to be an easier process.
3. **Automatic renewal of CSNA and HSNA** once approved, unless there is clear evidence of changed circumstances.
4. **Independent audit of carer out-of-pocket costs**, to accurately reflect the financial reality of raising children in care.

Carers are providing not just a home, but stability, love, and safety. Yet without fair financial support, many carers will walk away—not because they want to, but because they can no longer afford to stay. That loss would be devastating for children, who ultimately bear the cost of a system that underfunds the very people keeping them safe.

2. Easier Access to Loans

Access to loans remains one of the greatest barriers for carers. The system does not take into account the unique financial realities of fostering, which often require larger homes and vehicles.

- When we began, we had a **2-bedroom unit and a single cab ute**, perfectly suitable for a couple. As our family grew with children in care, we had no choice but to **upgrade to a 4-bedroom home and a dual cab ute**. Now, with even more children, we have moved into a **5-bedroom house and added a Kia Carnival**.
- These upgrades were not made for luxury or personal gain. They were necessities, directly tied to providing a **safe and practical home** for children in care. Housing a large family, transporting multiple children safely, and ensuring they each have space and stability comes at a significant financial cost.
- Yet when carers apply for loans, the system views us as if we are a “standard” household. It does not recognise that our expenses are higher because we are carrying the responsibilities of multiple children in long-term care. As a result, many carers are **denied the credit they need to make these essential adjustments**.

Proposed solutions:

1. Government-backed **low-interest loan schemes** specifically for foster and kinship carers, covering housing upgrades and safe, family-sized vehicles.
2. **Loan guarantee programs**, where the government co-signs loans to reduce the perceived risk for banks.
3. **Financial recognition in credit assessments**, ensuring lenders consider allowances and support payments as part of a carer’s income profile.

If the system expects carers to provide **stable, long-term homes**, it must also enable us to **access the financial tools to make those homes possible**.

3. Communication

Clear and open communication is critical for successful outcomes. Carers frequently operate with **partial information**, which limits their ability to respond effectively to children's needs.

- Children often arrive with **limited or inaccurate information**. Without full context, carers struggle to understand trauma triggers and provide appropriate care.
- Days can feel like we're working with **one arm behind our back**, piecing together trauma triggers from dribs and drabs of information. This makes it extremely difficult to provide safe, consistent, and responsive care.
- Example from my experience: One child had been **locked in rooms and cupboards, and suffered severe neglect**, yet the information we received from various staff was fragmented. This made supporting him extremely challenging. I had to interpret partial notes and advocate for the child without a full picture.
- Conversely, when a CSO actively coordinated therapy, appointments, and paperwork, consistently responded to calls and emails, and advocated for timely interventions, the child **thrived beyond what was initially predicted**.

Why it matters:

- Fragmented communication can delay critical interventions, prolong trauma, and undermine trust between carers, staff, and children.
- Timely and accurate information helps carers **anticipate triggers, coordinate therapy, and provide a stable, nurturing environment**.

Proposed solutions:

- Ensure **timely, accurate, and transparent communication** between carers, CS staff, agencies, and other professionals.
 - Provide carers with **full and relevant background information** for each child at intake and throughout placement.
 - Treat carers as **partners in decision-making**, not just recipients of directives.
 - Encourage **simple, practical measures**, such as responding to messages, confirming receipt of calls or emails, and providing updates—even brief ones—to make carers feel **heard and supported**.
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4. Teamwork

Teamwork is a **proven way to achieve the best outcomes for children**. Carers, Child Safety staff, agencies, and professionals must work together as **one unified team** with a shared focus on the child's best interests.

- Without teamwork, carers are left isolated, making decisions with only fragments of information. This leads to delays, inconsistency, and unnecessary stress for both the child and the carer.
- With teamwork, the results are transformative. In my own experience, when CSOs, agency staff, and carers worked as a coordinated team, children gained access to **therapy, educational support, and timely medical care**, which reduced stress and significantly improved their long-term outcomes.
- [REDACTED] **the force of action we can achieve when everyone works together as one team**. When carers' lived experience is recognised and included, the system can move from fragmented to cohesive, and the child truly benefits.

Proposed solutions:

1. Establish formal **care teams** for every placement, with scheduled check-ins and shared accountability.
2. Ensure carers' lived experience and insights are treated as an **equal voice at the table**.
3. Build a culture of **collaboration, not hierarchy**, so the focus always stays on the child's needs.
4. Create **formal protocols for joint care planning** and collaborative problem-solving, reducing conflict and delays.

5. Child-Focused Approach

Carers often feel they are **the only ones prioritising the child's best interests**.

- Children's needs can be overshadowed by bureaucracy or parental requests, even when parents are the source of harm or neglect.
- Example: [REDACTED]

While I fully support **contact and family connection**, because belonging is important, parents must **lose the voice of control** once they have demonstrated the poor choices that led to removal.

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

These examples show how prioritising parental control over the child’s wellbeing **creates further trauma and undermines healing**.

System Bias and Fear

It’s not only parents — carers also face pressure from within the system itself. Many carers know that if they challenge or upset a Child Safety Officer (CSO), they risk losing placements. This dynamic fosters a culture of silence, where carers are afraid to advocate too strongly for children in case it is seen as “difficult.”

Legislation and decisions are often made by adults with tertiary degrees, far removed from the day-to-day reality of raising children in care. Subconsciously, these decisions reflect adult emotions, professional interests, or system needs — rather than the child’s lived experience.

Being Child-Focused Means:

- Removing the **adult-focus** from decision-making.
- Ensuring parents retain **connection but not control** once a child is in care.
- Empowering carers to **advocate without fear of reprisal**.
- Making the child’s safety, healing, and stability the **sole priority**.

Proposed Solutions:

1. Embed **child-first principles** in legislation, case planning, and practice.
 2. Remove parental power to dictate daily life (schooling, birthdays, routines) once children are in care.
 3. Establish **independent advocacy protections** for carers who raise concerns, ensuring placements are not removed as punishment.
 4. Recognise carers as consistent, frontline voices for the child.
 5. Train staff and decision-makers to recognise and remove **adult-focused bias**, keeping the child at the centre of every decision.
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6. Mental Health & Wellbeing

Caring for children with trauma is emotionally demanding.

- Carers need **funded mental health support**, including counselling, therapy, and peer support networks. Many carers avoid seeking help from the agency, fearing it could impact placements.
- Children require **dedicated therapy**, including psychological support, speech therapy, and trauma-informed programs. Many children in care **do not qualify for NDIS**, yet their needs are significant.

Proposed solutions:

- Provide **confidential, fully funded mental health support for carers**.
 - Ensure **funded therapy and programs for children in care**, regardless of NDIS eligibility.
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7. Training

Training is essential for all carers.

- Currently, **kinship carers receive minimal start-up training** compared to foster carers, leaving them underprepared for complex placements.
- Compulsory, comprehensive training equips carers to respond effectively to **emergency placements, high-needs children, and trauma-related behaviours**.

Proposed solutions:

- Make training **compulsory for all carers**, including kinship carers.
 - Provide **ongoing support, mentoring, and accessible learning options** to ensure carers can implement best practices.
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8. Recognition & Respect for Carers

Carers provide stability, love, and security for children who have already experienced trauma — but the recognition we receive rarely reflects the significance of this role.

Last year, my partner and I received a \$7 coffee voucher during Foster Carer Week as a “thank you.” This year, it was a \$10 coffee voucher. After years of sacrifice, sleepless nights, advocacy, and commitment to children’s wellbeing, it is hard not to feel insulted. Is this really the value the system places on us?

Recognition must go beyond symbolic gestures. It should demonstrate genuine appreciation for the time, energy, and personal resources carers dedicate every day.

Meaningful Ways to Recognise Carers:

1. **Family Experiences:**

- Annual passes for carers and children to family attractions such as Seaworld, Movieworld, or local theme parks.
- \$500 accommodation vouchers so families can take holidays together and build positive memories.

2. **Everyday Support:**

- Dinner vouchers for the whole family, to ease the load and create shared joy.
- Two months of funded household cleaning, acknowledging the relentless workload carers take on.
- Yard maintenance support, so time can be spent with children instead of on chores.

3. **Practical Financial Recognition:**

- \$500 vouchers for groceries at Coles or Woolworths.
- \$500 shopping vouchers per person (children and adults) for essentials and experiences — whether that's clothes, school supplies, or something special.

These measures would not only recognise the value of carers but also **directly benefit the children in care**, helping them feel included, celebrated, and supported as part of a family unit.

Proposed Solutions:

1. Replace token gestures with **annual, practical recognition packages** that genuinely support carers and children.
2. Ensure recognition is **family-centred**, acknowledging that caring impacts the whole household.
3. Create a **consistent national recognition framework**, so carers feel valued equally across regions.

Recognition is not about luxury — it is about dignity, respect, and acknowledgement of the enormous contribution carers make to the lives of children and to society as a whole.

9. Permanency and LTG-O (with Cultural Awareness)

For children in long-term care, permanency is not just an outcome — it is a promise of belonging. Yet the current process is broken. Instead of offering stability, it creates fear for carers and uncertainty for children.

Carers are often hesitant to pursue Long-Term Guardianship Orders (LTG-O) or permanency because doing so can reopen the entire kinship search. Even when kin were thoroughly assessed and deemed unsuitable years earlier, the system requires that every relative be recontacted and reconsidered. Many of these individuals have had no involvement with the child for years, yet they are pressured into placements by Child Safety. This destabilises the child and undermines the secure attachments they have built with their carers.

Children who have been in continuous, committed placements for four years or more should not be forced to live with this uncertainty. They deserve the right to permanency where they are safe and thriving. Carers who have provided love, stability, and security should be recognised and supported in formalising those placements.

Cultural Awareness

Cultural identity is a vital part of every child's story, and carers overwhelmingly respect this. Most carers make intentional efforts to preserve and nurture the cultural heritage of the children they care for — often without meaningful support from Child Safety.

Despite this, carers are sometimes told they cannot apply for permanency because they are not from the same cultural background as the child. This approach is deeply unfair. Culture must be celebrated and supported, but it should not be used as a barrier to stability. Children should not have to sacrifice belonging and security in order to preserve culture. Both can — and must — coexist.

Proposed Solutions

1. **Automatic Permanency Pathway:** For placements over four years where carers have shown commitment and the child is thriving, offer a direct path to permanency or LTG-O without reopening kinship searches.
2. **End Kinship Pressure:** Stop pressuring extended family members into taking placements years after children have settled into stable homes.
3. **Balanced Cultural Support:** Provide cultural awareness training, community connection opportunities, and funding for carers — but remove the barrier that prevents non-cultural carers from applying for permanency.
4. **Child-Centred Decision Making:** Permanency decisions must always be based on the child's attachments, needs, and long-term security, not bureaucratic repetition or misplaced cultural gatekeeping.

10. Passion

Passion is the driving force behind quality care. Carers cannot do this work without it — the long nights, the trauma behaviours, the endless advocacy, and the sacrifices we make are only possible because of deep passion for the children we welcome into our homes.

But passion is not limited to carers. Many Child Safety staff also carry an extraordinary passion for the children they work with. Their dedication, long hours, and willingness to fight for the best outcomes for kids often goes unseen. Too often, however, systemic barriers, overwhelming caseloads, and red tape stifle that passion. Staff who enter this work to change lives can become burnt out and disillusioned when the system itself stands in the way.

how passion, when shared between carers and staff, can change the trajectory of a child's life. of how teamwork driven by passion — rather than obligation — delivered outcomes that would not have been possible otherwise. That passion is not about carers versus staff, but about all of us standing side by side for one purpose: the child.

Carers and Child Safety staff share a common purpose: the wellbeing of the child. When both carers and staff are supported, respected, and allowed to lean into their passion, the system can work as intended — with children truly at the centre.

Proposed Solutions:

1. **Protect Passion:** Ensure both carers and staff have access to mental health support, peer networks, and adequate resources to sustain their commitment.
2. **Cut the Red Tape:** Streamline processes so staff and carers can spend more time focusing on children, less time battling paperwork.
3. **Recognition for Staff and Carers:** Celebrate passion at all levels of the system, recognising both carers and staff who go above and beyond.
4. **Shared Voice:** Foster collaboration between carers and staff, treating both groups as partners in care rather than separate or opposing forces.

Passion is not optional in this work — it is essential. By recognising, supporting, and protecting the passion of both carers and staff, we build a system where children receive not just care, but love, advocacy, and hope.

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Table of Recommendations

Theme	Proposed Solutions
Payments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increase all payments by 200% to reflect actual out-of-pocket costs. 2. Remove the annual re-justification process for CSNA/HSNA once needs are proven. 3. Streamline reimbursement processes with a single-point approval system for medical, dental, and educational expenses.
Access to Loans	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Government-backed low-interest loan schemes for carers to upgrade housing and vehicles. 2. Loan guarantee programs where government co-signs to reduce bank risk. 3. Ensure credit assessments recognise foster allowances and support payments as income.
Communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Require transparent, open, and consistent communication between all parties. 2. Create a centralised record-sharing system so carers are not left answering doctors with “I don’t know.” 3. Remove personal biases and focus solely on the child in all communication and decision-making.
Teamwork	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish genuine team-based approaches with carers as equal partners. 2. Provide clear pathways for carers to raise concerns without fear of losing placements. 3. Regular joint meetings to ensure consistency across carers, staff, and agencies.
Child Focused	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Decisions must prioritise the child’s needs over parents’ wants. 2. Remove the “voice of control” from parents who have demonstrated neglect or harm, while still supporting contact and belonging. 3. Train decision-makers to separate personal feelings from legislative processes, keeping children’s best interests at the centre.
Mental Health & Wellbeing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Funded, confidential counselling and peer support for carers, with choice of provider and no access to files by Child Safety. 2. Dedicated funding for children’s therapy, including trauma-informed care, speech therapy, and psychology, beyond NDIS.
Training	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mandatory, accessible training for <i>all</i> carers (foster and kin). 2. Ensure kinship carers are given time, resources, and support to complete training. 3. Provide ongoing trauma-informed and cultural training for carers and staff.
Recognition & Respect for Carers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Replace token gestures (e.g., \$7 or \$10 vouchers) with meaningful recognition. 2. Examples include: family attraction passes, \$500 accommodation vouchers, family dinner vouchers, two months of cleaning support, yard maintenance, \$500 grocery vouchers, and

Theme	Proposed Solutions
Permanency & LTG-O (with Cultural Awareness)	<p>\$500 shopping vouchers per person (children and carers).</p> <p>3. Create a national recognition framework that acknowledges carers consistently.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Automatic permanency/guardianship pathway for placements over 4 years where carers have demonstrated commitment. 2. End practice of re-seeking and pressuring kin years after initial assessments. 3. Remove cultural background as a barrier to permanency while providing cultural support and connection plans. 4. Ensure decisions focus on stability, belonging, and attachments, not bureaucratic repetition.
Passion (Carers & Staff)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Protect the passion of carers and staff by providing mental health support and manageable caseloads. 2. Streamline processes to reduce red tape and frustration. 3. Recognise and celebrate both carers and staff who demonstrate extraordinary commitment. 4. Encourage shared purpose and collaboration, ensuring carers and staff stand together as one team focused on the child.