



## Open adoption of children in NSW out-of-home care - Foster carers' perceptions



### What do current foster carers say about adopting children in their care?

The Institute conducted an internet-based survey with 76 foster carers in NSW between October and December 2017. The survey explored perceptions, motivations and barriers to adopting children from out-of-home care (OOHC), with a focus on whether to adopt the children currently in their care. Thirty carers also participated in a focus group to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and views of foster carers.

The context for the study was the major reforms initiated by the NSW Government to reduce the number of children who remain in long-term foster care, and to prioritise Kinship care, guardianship, or open adoption when restoration is not realistically possible. The survey and focus groups were conducted to explore the influence of these reforms on foster carers' decisions to pursue open adoption of children in their care and to understand their experiences, including of birth parent contact.

### Key Findings

- Carers' decisions about adopting the children in their care are complex and involve weighing up the emotional and practical benefits and drawbacks of adoption. These decisions are influenced by societal, political, systemic, and personal factors.
- Motivating factors relate to being able to provide a lifelong, permanent, secure and stable home for the child in their care, and of having autonomy to make parenting decisions independent of out-of-home care agencies.

- Barriers to adoption from out-of-home care in NSW appear to outweigh the motivators. These barriers include a lack of reliable information about the adoption process, loss of access to specialist services for their children, and having to manage birth family contact without support.
- Many carers reported receiving inconsistent and inaccurate information to their enquires about adoption from out-of-home care and that high turnover of caseworkers made it difficult to progress their applications.
- Carers want to be able to access support and specialist services when issues arise with their children, as a result of their experiences prior to entering care.
- Carers and children's support needs vary from peer networks to intensive therapeutic programs.
- Carers believe that adequate post-adoption financial and other support should be made available for adopted children and families, including assistance with managing birth family contact if necessary.
- Adoption of Aboriginal children is a sensitive issue that needs to be carefully considered in consultation with Aboriginal communities and agencies. The best interests of children need to be balanced with the importance of maintaining connections with culture, Kin and Country.

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#### For more information

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### How was the study conducted?

The foster carer survey included 76 respondents (92% female), who completed an online survey. The survey questions included: history and experience of providing foster care, awareness and understanding of open adoption, perspectives and motivation to adopt from foster care, perceptions and attitudes towards birth families. Additional questions asked respondents to rate their level of social support and life satisfaction, and requested demographic information (e.g., gender, marital status, education level).

Thirty carers took part in focus groups held in 4 different locations in NSW (metropolitan and regional) that ran for approximately 2 hours. Carers received caseworker support from either a non-government foster care agency (85%) or from NSW Family and Community Services (15%). Carers were asked a series of questions, designed to capture their views about being a foster carer and the factors they considered when deciding whether to adopt the children in their care. Three main themes emerged from analysis of the focus group discussions:

1. Meeting the support needs of children
2. Sourcing credible information
3. Relationships with birth family

### Carers perspectives on adoption

When asked about the likelihood of considering adoption in the survey, over half of carers (52%) were very likely to consider adopting the child in their care, 13% were somewhat likely, and 17% were undecided.

Many carers demonstrated a nuanced view of adoption: they believed that foster care already provided children a safe and nurturing family and were hesitant to suggest that adoption was necessarily *better* than foster care. However, they held a strong belief that adoption should always be in the service of the child and not for the sole benefit of prospective adoptive parents.



**Over three-quarters (78%) of carers feel highly-supported by their community (i.e., family, friends, other foster carers).**

### Main findings

Carers' primary motivation to adopt is to provide permanency, stability and belonging to the children in their care, and to have autonomy in making parenting decisions.

### Top perceived benefits of adopting a child from OOHC endorsed by foster carers were:

- giving the child a greater sense of security and permanency (80%)
- removing the need to seek permission from FACS or the support agency for parenting decisions and family activities (80%)
- establishing the carer's lifelong commitment to the child and supporting the continuity of the carer's relationship with them (78%)



*"So, the only thing I think is that she'll get my last name and for her, it's permanency, a guaranteed permanency for the rest of her life. If something happens to me she still stays with a member of the family or friends, she never has to start over anywhere new ever again. That's the only difference. Contact stays the same and everything stays the same for us other than she would have that guarantee, permanent guarantee."*

Adoption was noted by carers as allowing them to be 'free' of an agency, but they wanted to have services they could request when they thought they needed it.



**Over two-thirds of carers (67%) are satisfied or very satisfied with the level of support they receive from their agency.**

Overseas studies indicate families who completed the adoption process often had a supportive adoption worker and network of family of friends, as well as access to counselling and support groups which helped them through challenges during the process.



### Meeting the support needs of children

The need for post-adoption support and services was noted as more of a barrier than loss of financial support. Carers emphasised that children in out-of-home care are likely to have high needs, either currently or in the future, so they would want post-adoption services to be available when they requested it. For some, the loss of the financial supports they received as foster carers was a barrier because the children in their care often had particular needs and required specialist services.

#### Carers' top concerns about adopting the children in their care:

- **loss of access to support services provided to carers (38%)**
- **length of the adoption process (37%)**
- **needing to manage birth family contact without casework support (37%).**
- **loss of financial supports they currently receive as a carer (33%)**
- **meeting the complex needs of the children without the support that is available for carers (33%)**



The newly introduced means-tested adoption allowance was perceived as inadequate for supporting specific children's needs. In the focus groups, carers recommended the allowance be made universal. Carers were clear that they were not motivated by money, and their concern was their ability to provide what these children may require as issues emerged, without the support provided by agencies.

*"... you feel put off by saying "Oh, it comes down to money", because then you've got a general public, "Oh, you foster carers, yeah, you just take the money"... It's like "Hang on mate, we're doing seven days a week, 24 hours a day for about a dollar an hour, how about you come and step in my shoes and tell me you're doing it for the money". So that puts you off saying "Look, I would love to do this, but I can't afford it" or it's not enough money, because then you're getting this thing "Foster carers just do it for the money".*

Nearly all carers (90%) agreed or strongly agreed that access to therapeutic and other support services were important to them, but carers were divided on whether the services they received were adequate for the needs of the children in their care.

Over a third of carers (39%) indicated they were unable to access therapies and support services for the child in their care. The most cited reasons were long waiting lists, lack of local specialist services, and cost.

*"Do you know what, the majority of children that come into care need something down the track. There's not too many kids that I've had in my care that down the track they haven't needed some sort of support... I'm not saying it can't happen, do you know what I mean? But most people that come into care, somewhere down the track, percentage is, it's going to affect them in some way. Like, "Why was I given up? Why was I removed?" You know, "Why don't I see my family? Why did my mother do this?" So I think you've just got to have some sort of support backing, that if the child needs it, that you can actually afford to do it, if that makes sense."*

### Consistent and reliable information

Nearly three-quarters of carers (71%) were aware of the introduction of the means-tested post-adoption allowance but 62% of carer indicated that information about the changes to the adoption process and allowances did not come from their agency.

*"I went along to that support group for quite a while, and I found that quite useful because it was run independently of the agency or Community Services, and it was facilitated by people who were foster carers. The level of information I was able to get from those people, was totally invaluable. It was far more than what the agency ever gave me."*



This lack of consistent and reliable information about the adoption process from OOHC agencies was noted as a barrier to adoption by carers. They reported caseworkers provided confusing and conflicting information and reported that the ‘goal posts’ could change once the adoption process was underway.

“...the tables are always changing in our agency. We have caseworkers who do this, and caseworkers who do that. But there are times that we’ve had a case manager who has said the world is white, and an adoption team leader who said the world is black, and it was like... in the same agency, they had such vastly different understandings of what the adoption process was.”

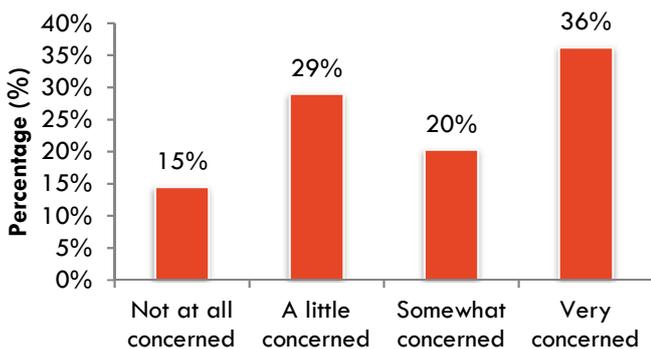
The adoption of Aboriginal children, especially by non-Aboriginal carers, was also noted as a challenge. Some carers believed that adoption should be considered for all children, including Aboriginal children, whereas others commented that adoption should not be considered the answer for everything.

### Managing birth family contact

The majority of carers expressed some level of concern about managing post-adoption birth family contact, with over a third (36%) being very concerned.

These concerns were mostly in relation to the impact of the birth parents’ behaviour on the child, which they did not feel confident managing (50%), the distress caused to the child during contact visits (26%), and their belief that adoptive parents and birth families often do not get along (24%).

#### How concerned are you about the responsibility to manage contact arrangements if you adopt...



Carers were concerned about the prospect of being responsible for managing independent interactions with birth families without any involvement from their agency. The reluctance of carers to be responsible for contact was a major barrier to pursuing open adoption. Despite dissatisfaction with agency interference and a desire for greater autonomy over their lives, many carers were ambivalent about losing agency involvement altogether.

“In terms of my son maintaining contact with his siblings and his mother, I don’t really have any concerns at all. We try, and I try and foster a relationship between him and one of his younger siblings... That happens in between contact, quite informally, which is quite a positive thing. In terms of him seeing his mum, he loves his mum. He wants to see her, so I will always encourage that. My only concern is that dad is currently incarcerated, and dad is pretty scary... I guess, I have concerns about actually running a supervised contact session with his dad without some form of support... When it comes to actually developing an adoption plan, I would actually like to raise that, that I have the option of including some sort of community worker as part of that supervised contact...”

### Conclusions

The current approach to adoption in NSW is distinctly different from past adoption practices. In particular, adoption practices are characterised by the *open* exchange of information and there is often an expectation of direct contact to occur between birth and adoptive families

There has been little systematic Australian research on key factors that foster carers consider in their decisions to adopt the children in their care. While many foster carers revealed that they would consider adoption, to provide their child with greater stability and security, concerns about the availability of post-adoption support, financial stressors, as well as managing birth family contact, act as significant barriers. If there is to be an increase the number of children adopted from OOHC, there will need to be a systematic response to these barriers, including:

- consideration of adequate post-adoption financial and non-financial support for adopted children and families
- improvements in the credibility and availability of information about adoption from OOHC
- review of the purpose and management of birth family contact.