



## A place to call home for children in state care – home-based care

*One of the greatest issues facing us when we remove children from their birth families is finding safe, stable and nurturing homes in which they can live.*

*In this two-part article we look at the problems identified in Commissioner Nyland's [October 2016 report](#) and the [Government's response](#) in December.*

In South Australia, children are cared for under three main systems, home based care (which includes foster care and kinship care), residential care and emergency care.

### **Home-based care**

In this article, we will look at home-based care; what Commissioner Nyland recommended in her report and how the [Government is responding](#).

#### *Foster care*

Home-based care is thought by most authorities and researchers to be the best option for most of the children placed into state care. In recent years, however, the supply of families willing to foster children has not been able to keep up with the increasing numbers coming into care. Changes in society in Australia and in similar countries around the world have meant that there are fewer families willing or able to foster children.

In her report, Commissioner Nyland was persuaded that the poor treatment of foster carers by staff of the then Families SA, lack of clarity about roles and a lack of support for foster carers have dissuaded families continuing or becoming foster carers.

Commissioner Nyland made a range of recommendations designed to improve the skills, remuneration, support, rights and voice of foster carers, most of which were accepted or accepted in-principle by the Government in December 2016. These are the major changes.

Induction training for foster carers is to be changed to include material on managing trauma-related behaviours and on the types of support available (R112) and will include input from agency staff, children and existing carers in foster carers (R113). For consistency, all foster carer training will be co-ordinated by the Child and Family Welfare Association (R125).

Advocacy organisation Connecting Foster Carers will be funded to provide advocacy services for foster carers (R115) and to develop new materials making clear foster carers' rights (R116).

A system for resolving carer complaints will be set up (R127) and there will be a revised process within the Department to ensure that proper consideration is given to the removal of children from long-term placements, though this is not the independent panel that Commissioner Nyland recommended (R118).

The right of approved carers to have access to information about the children they care for will be guaranteed in the new child safety legislation (R98).

The role of the NGOs that provide support for carers will be clarified (R115) and those organisations will be reimbursed more consistently (R115). The Child and Family Welfare Association will be contracted to coordinate respite services for carers (R126).

Placements that are at risk or under stress will be guaranteed access to therapeutic support (R84).

The Government has also supported a number of recommendations leading to a more flexible tiered model of foster care. Remuneration rates and structures will be reviewed (R119). Foster carers will be able to change support agencies (R121) and to develop their skills and increase remuneration (R120) in line with the changing needs of the children they care for.

Pre-empting the formal response, a handbook documenting carers support payments has been produced and is publicly available (R123).

### *Kinship care*

Kinship care has grown rapidly in recent years and it was popular within Families SA because it promised an alternative to the declining numbers of foster placements available. It also offered the opportunity for children to maintain family connections, including recognising the significance of cultural connections for Aboriginal children coming into care.

As Commissioner Nyland revealed, though, the rush into kinship care has meant a lack of careful screening of many care placements and the lack of ongoing support to kinship carers once placements are started. Many children placed under fast-track interim registration processes have not had their situations reviewed. The result has been an increase in unsuitable and, at times, unsafe placements and increased numbers of placement breakdowns.

The breakdown of home-based placements is not just a numerical problem for the system. Each breakdown represents a significant crisis in the life of children who are frequently already traumatised.

The Government has accepted the need for a complete overhaul and expansion of kinship care assessment processes, resources and tools to improve speed and efficiency of their response (R104,R105,R106). As part of this, there will be developed or purchased a new tool to assess the safety and appropriateness of prospective kinship placements (R103).

A backlog team is promised within the Department to review the placements of children who were placed under interim registration processes and not reviewed within the required three-month period (R109).

The Government has not accepted the recommendation to outsource to NGOs kinship care recruitment and support as is done with foster care, keeping it within the Department instead (R102).

Look for part 2 of this article on the [Guardian's website](#) where we discuss residential care and emergency care.