



Connecting Foster & Kinship Carers | SA Inc

advocate • support • connect • inform

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Dear Ms Carter and Ms Schaefer,

RE: KPMG Carer Advocacy Services review

On behalf of Connecting Foster Carers – SA Inc (CFC-SA), the peak body for foster and kinship carers (Carers) in South Australia, we respectfully submit this information in support of the Carer Advocacy Services review.

We believe CFC-SA is uniquely positioned to deliver the advocacy services and develop associated education material as stated in Recommendations 116 and 117 of the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission report handed down by Royal Commissioner Margaret Nyland on 5 August 2016.

We look forward to working together as part of an improved child protection system to achieve better outcomes for children and young people in care through delivering essential services to foster and kinship carer families.

Yours faithfully,

Megan Hender
Interim Board Chairperson

Amanda Porter
Chief Executive Officer

28 April 2017

Introduction

Child protection is about protecting children and young people from harm. For children and young people who have been removed from their families and placed under guardianship of the Minister, it is also about caring for those children and young people who have experienced abuse and neglect to recover from their experience and to provide opportunities for them to grow and thrive as part of a family. Kinship carers and foster carers (Carers) open their homes and their hearts to provide approximately 83% (Nov 2016) of this care in South Australia, entrusted to deliver this care by the Department for Child Protection (DCP) and supported by foster care agencies and kinship care teams.

In August 2016, The Honourable Margaret Nyland AM, Commissioner, published her Royal Commission Report into Child Protection Systems: *The Life They Deserve* (Commission Report). The Commission Report made 260 recommendations on the reform of the child protection system in South Australia. Two of those recommendations relate directly to our organisation, Connecting Foster Carers – SA Inc (CFC-SA). They are:

- **Recommendation 116** Fund Connecting Foster Carers, or an appropriate alternative agency, to deliver an advocacy service with paid staff to support carers to access and exercise their rights.
- **Recommendation 117** Fund the advocacy service to develop education material which clearly describes foster parents rights to contribute to decision making, and their rights of review regarding decisions which affect them.

The Government published its response to the Commission Report recommendations, *A Fresh Start*, on 29 November 2016. It recognised CFC-SA as the main representative body providing an advocacy service to Carers and accepted both recommendations. The *A Fresh Start* response added (amongst other things):

- in relation to recommendation 116: *'before implementing recommendation 116, current arrangements for advocacy services for foster carers will be reviewed, including whether CFC is the agency best placed to provide this service.'*
- in relation to recommendation 117: *'Consideration of how a carer advocacy service model would be designed and implemented (recommendation 116) will look at the development of educational material and whether it is most appropriately delivered by a funded advocacy service.'*

The Commission Report recommendations and subsequent *A Fresh Start* response follow the previous Interim Report publication in September 2015 by the Select Committee on Statutory Child Protection and Care in South Australia who proposed at Recommendation 23: *'That an independent organisation advocating for foster carers be properly resourced'* and at Recommendation 28: *'That Connecting Foster Carers SA Inc. be supported to operate at arm's length from FSA [Families SA], including having paid staff.'*

As we understand it KPMG has been appointed to review advocacy services to determine whether CFC-SA is the agency best placed to provide this advocacy service, and to consider the appropriateness of CFC-SA in developing and delivering associated educational material, in light of the Commissioner's recommendations and the Government's response.

It is our contention that CFC-SA should be immediately funded, to operate a peak body service employing eight full-time equivalent staff, for the following reasons:

- **The Carer's voice needs to be well represented during this period of transition and into the future.**
- **We have a proven track record and the trust of the Carer community.**
- **We are 'funding ready'.**
- **We have strong, productive and positive relationships with other relevant organisations.**
- **Proper resourcing will enable CFC-SA to better meet our longstanding mandate – to advocate, support, connect and inform – and assist DCP to meet the recommendations of the Royal Commission.**
- **We understand, and can meet, the challenges associated with providing the services recommended by the Commissioner.**

Each of these is discussed in detail below, with related documentation attached or available on our website: www.cfc-sa.org.au .

The Carer's voice needs to be well represented during this period of transition and into the future.

The Commission Report recommendation to fund CFC-SA (or another similar agency) is now over 8 months old. The recommendation was made, in part at least, to ensure that Carers who underpin child protection in SA are given the respect and resources they deserve, so that they can properly represent themselves and the children and young people they love and nurture in their homes. Since the Commission Report was published a great many changes have been made: the Department has been re-born, a Commissioner for Children and Young People has been appointed, policy has been re-shaped and very significant legislative and procedural change has been prepared. All these changes have happened, and are continuing to happen, without the Carers' peak body properly resourced to make the fulsome contribution Carers, and their families, deserve. This situation needs to be remedied as a matter of urgency. CFC-SA stands ready, and able, to fulfil that role.

That is not to say that Carers have been ignored. CFC-SA acknowledges and applauds the involvement of Carers by DCP in various child protection reform implementation forums and through a range of different mediums. Carers are being asked to share their views and this is much appreciated. This involvement however is no substitute for the considered, consistent, constructive and well informed contribution an adequately resourced peak body can provide.

Urgent action is also needed for the following reasons:

- All the evidence and recommendations to date show that supporting Carers is one of the keys to better outcomes for children and young people in the care system. The longer it takes to begin this essential work the more Carers will exit the system, less Carers will enter the system and children and young people will miss out on vital family-based care.
- Carers will require considerable support to navigate new legislation and associated regulations, to understand the many changes occurring to systems and processes with DCP, to continue to work effectively with their foster care agency or kinship care team and, not least, to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. A key element for reform involves supporting Carer families and there will need to be stronger provision of advice and assistance for Carers during transition and into the future.
- Anecdotal evidence indicates that the changes that have been made to date are not yet translating into real change for Carer families. DCP needs to know and understand this. Internal departmental changes, made in the absence of true partnerships with other agencies also seeking better outcomes for children and young people, may well have unintended real world consequences or missed opportunities for real world change. A properly funded peak body can provide vital external feedback and advocacy to the Department – to support internal decision making, and avoid costly mistakes.
- Many Carers will not speak up individually about issues they experience with DCP and fear reprisals including removal of a child or young person from their care. Carers worry that asking for help from DCP will be held against them or may be viewed as an inability to cope. This is even more pronounced in CALD communities, who often state they ‘do not want to cause any trouble’ by asking questions. Again, a properly resourced peak body that can address issues on behalf of individuals is this vital to new system working well.
- The poor relationship between Carers and Families SA was highlighted in *The Life They Deserve* report which noted: *A number of foster parents told the Commission that they loved their foster children, but they would not recommend the experience to others. There were some examples of good cooperative relationships but, in many other examples, carers were treated poorly and the value of their contribution was minimised. They were often met with the comment, ‘You’re just the carer’.* Carers continue to reflect consistent themes including feeling undervalued, uninformed about the children and young people placed in their care, and not acknowledged for the care they provide. A newly shaped system cannot be seen to fall into the same error. A fulsome response to the Nyland recommendations that supports resourcing the important Carer community is a vital step in improving and rebuilding relationships of trust between the new DCP and Carers.

We have a proven track record and the trust of the Carer community.

CFC-SA is the peak body for foster and kinship carers in SA. It was established by Carers, for Carers, over 20 years ago. CFC-SA has the trust of the Carer community as evidenced by support for systems advocacy, requests for individual advocacy and attendance at key events. Our focus is to improve the lives of children and young people by supporting those that care for them – through advocacy, information, support and connections with other Carers.

Our organisation was incorporated in 1999. We currently have over 500 Carer Member families and over 30 associate Members in various locations throughout the state. Our membership is growing with Members joining up to access membership benefits, to remain informed and to support the work of CFC-SA for the benefit of the broader foster and kinship care community in South Australia, who provide care for 83% of over 3000 children in care. CFC-SA is well known by the foster care agencies in South Australia who promote our services to new Carers.

Our Board has, until recently, been comprised fully of Carers who give their time willingly to govern, share their caring experiences and provide peer support.

CFC-SA has a track record of representing the interests of Carers and the children and young people in their care:

- In February 2015, CFC-SA presented its submissions to the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission, seeking to redress the inadequacies of South Australia’s legislative and policy framework at that time and calling for action that is genuinely in the best interests of children and young people. CFC-SA’s position was based on ensuring the best interests of each child and remains true today: *“The Commission must be guided by research that consistently and unequivocally demonstrates that early, decisive intervention that results in stability and security ensures the best possible outcomes for children and young people entering the child protection system.”*
- Again in 2015, then Chair of CFC-SA, Jo Jarvis gave public evidence to the Select Committee on Child Protection and Care in South Australia. This was included as part of her statement: *“...families are leaving the system in droves, because they can’t stand the system. They’re not leaving because of the kids; they stay because of the kids. There would be so many who would leave if it wasn’t for the commitment they have to their children.”*
- Since that time, CFC-SA has responded to the recommendations from *The Life They Deserve*, considered the Government’s *A Fresh Start*, provided submissions on the draft Children and Young People (Safety) Bill 2016 (SA) and pursued further changes to the 2017 Bill, advocating for legal rights for Carers. Our submissions, activities and media releases relating to the legislation are available on our website: www.cfc-sa.org.au .

- CFC-SA has been sought out by various stakeholders to support initiatives and to provide ‘the Carers’ voice’. For example: recently our CEO was invited to join the board of Child and Family Welfare Association SA (CAFWA-SA) as a co-opted member; previously, Dr Sara McLean from the Australian Centre for Child Protection has consulted with CFC-SA, leading to the facilitation of forums for Carers regarding the creation of online resources to assist Carers with understanding and managing trauma based behaviours.

Perhaps the best example of our track record with Carers is the interest CFC-SA receives each year for the annual Recharge event. The event is held over 2 sessions, with a day session (offering crèche facilities) and an evening session for working families. CFC-SA has introduced internationally acclaimed key note speakers to equip and encourage Carer families and others who work with children and young people to understand and manage challenging behaviours – in 2016 it was Fay Jackson bringing ‘understanding about mental health’ and strategies for self care.

The Recharge event is well regarded for delivering trauma informed practice training sessions – especially beneficial to kinship carers (and DCP kinship support workers) who do not receive training on this topic through their kinship care teams. The event also provides opportunities to share relevant information and has generous time set aside for peer interaction and networking. The day session is usually well attended by staff from DCP and foster care agencies. Feedback from evaluation reports in 2016 included:

- “Fabulous to relate mental health to us & our kids; simply perfect day” (Foster family);
- “Thank you for hosting the event; a lovely opportunity to connect with others” (Kinship carer);
- “Very helpful personally & professionally” (Carer support worker); and
- “Meeting more foster/kinship carers was great” (Families SA staff).

We are ‘funding ready’

From its inception and until recently our organisation was wholly volunteer led and run. In 2016 we were provided with a small grant allowing us to appoint two paid staff:

- a CEO, recruited in August 2016 (0.5 FTE casual initially, now 0.8 FTE casual); and
- an Administration Officer, recruited in December 2016 (0.2 FTE casual).

These appointments have enabled us to make considerable advances in governance, strategy and operations.

We have already been able to put in place the following new governance arrangements:

- In March 2017 we adopted a new constitution, based on Office of Consumer and Business Affairs template and with input from members and legal advice from Rick Harley, of Jones Harley Toole.
- We have begun the process of applying for charitable status – part of our longer term plan to widen our financial base.

- The Board has begun the transition from an operational board to a skills-based board. The current Board is made up of seven members, five of whom are registered Carers. The intention is to retain a majority of board members from the foster and kinship carer community, while adding the professional skills needed. The current composition of the Board includes Board Members with industry and sector knowledge, together with legal skills focusing on child protection law.
- Our first step in this transition has been to appoint a Treasurer with strong financial background (Marc Sodomka CPA, FAICD). The quality of financial reports has vastly improved, together with awareness and understanding of overall financial performance.
- Recently we have also recruited and appointed an interim Chairperson, Megan Hender to lead CFC-SA through this review and the anticipated growth phase we expect will follow. Megan is a lawyer with extensive board experience. She currently sits on the board of The Adelaide Central Market Authority and the Festival of Arts, and on the Advisory Board of SA Leaders. She is a graduate of, and a regular presenter for, the Australian Institute of Company Directors, and is currently serving a term as Deputy Lord Mayor of the City of Adelaide.
- Future board appointments are envisaged and wholly supported by current board members (who have expressed a willingness to step aside as new, appropriately qualified board members are appointed).
- We have developed a clear strategy, by necessity, short term in its scope. A longer term (2020) strategic plan will be guided by the new Chairperson when the outcome of this review is known and informs future funding decisions.
- Kate Costello of Governance Matters has provided a program of tailored governance training workshops to all Board members.
- We have updated all membership records, to improve our ability to communicate directly with current members both via email and (where email not available) by mail.
- The Board monitors CEO performance and the quality of operational reports has vastly improved, together with ability to be more available across the sector. The CEO has drawn on the skills, knowledge and experience of past and current board members during the transition phase and they have acted in a volunteer capacity to support the CEO to deliver the full range of work, including events, forums, information sessions, attendance at sector meetings. Portfolio areas based on skills and experience are currently being considered to lead future work across multiple areas.
- A newly formed Board policy committee is now in place to review and draft policies and procedures. This committee has begun working on areas addressed with the new constitution.

Most importantly though the recent appointment of paid staff has allowed us to more effectively deliver on our mandate – to advocate, support, connect and inform. We set out below some of our recent operational achievements.

Advocate

- We have identified that our advocacy falls into two categories – individual advocacy (helping individual Carers to navigate the system) and systems advocacy (working to improve the system for the future). Each informs the other.
- Our individual advocacy focuses on giving Carers an effective voice, and ensuring they understand their choices and options and the impact of their decisions.
- Our systems advocacy includes making formal submissions and responses to parliamentary and departmental consultation requests; publication of media releases and communication on issues, trends and campaigns; and identifying common concerns to raise at a systems level with the DCP Strategic Partnerships team and other relevant agencies and services.
- As one recent example, CFC-SA responded to the *Children and Young People (Safety) Bill 2017 (SA)*, seeking the removal of the risk of prison and fines for carers, and advocated for the reintroduction of SACAT review. CFC-SA was successful in removing the prison penalty and in reducing fines from \$50K to \$10K in the current draft – and has been informed DCP will be continuing to review the range of reviewable decisions by SACAT.
- CFC-SA has made a request to register with the Legal Practitioners Education and Admission Council (LPEAC) as an institution for the purposes of a Category D volunteer practising certificate. This would allow a legal practitioner to support CFC-SA on an as needed basis initially and give legal advice, subject to CFC-SA covering them under professional indemnity insurance. We have received interest from a legal practitioner who is a current Carer and interested in undertaking this work, and hopes that future development of the organisation could see us seek assistance from other practitioners.

Support

- Carer support is a key element in the provision of all our peak body services. We prioritise the needs of Carers by ensuring they look after themselves and are then able to look after their families and care for children and young people. 1800 phone calls and email enquiries are responded to by staff, drawing on experience of volunteers (from our board and membership) where needed. We connect Carers with peers (in local areas where possible), recognising the benefits of peer support. We provide referrals to appropriate services within the child protection sector (e.g. Crisis Care; the Guardian for Children and Young People) and outside the sector (e.g. G.P. and other health services; Lifeline for after hours support).
- We were recently successful in receiving funding from the Department for Communities and Social Inclusion (DCSI) through Grants SA for \$11,229 towards development of the 'CFC-SA Peer Support Network' project. This project intends to develop a network of skilled volunteers to deliver peer support for Carers across 10 regions in SA. The network will provide local insight and understanding, reduce isolation (especially in rural and remote areas), enable learning through shared experiences, and offer ongoing support and guidance for the challenges and successes of caring for children and young people in care. Having a structured network and incorporating reporting mechanisms will also allow CFC-SA to capture issues, determine commonalities, seek out areas of best practice and advocate more effectively for individual and system improvements. CFC-SA has recently asked DCP for supplemental funding of \$8,771 to deliver the project as intended.

- As just one example of Carer support, we recently provided support to a distressed Carer who contacted us through our 1800 number following removal of three children aged under two from his and his wife's care. We were able to acknowledge his grief and concern, advise him of his right to request information and assist him to formulate questions. We also talked to him about ensuring his personal health needs were prioritised, discussed options and reinforced to him the need for him to continue to present as a confident and capable Carer despite the emotional distress of the situation. We believe this sort of intervention assists not only the Carer, but also DCP – as Carers supported in this way are often better able to articulate their concerns when interacting with departmental staff.

Connect

- On 24 March 2017 we held a Forum for Carers at the Morphettville Racecourse – attended by 59 (attendees), the majority of whom were current foster and kinship carers. This forum, and other events of this nature, are generally held during school hours to maximise attendance by parents and include opportunities for Carers to meet and hear from other Carers – and thus again facilitating much needed peer interaction and support.
- We have attended metropolitan Carer support groups, interacting with Carers and offering information, support and referrals where necessary.
- We also offer opportunities for Carers to connect through regular annual events such as the Recharge event and family fun event.
- Connection does not only occur with the Carer community. CFC-SA has presented to Key Assets carer groups, and to groups of support workers from country foster care agencies in Adelaide for training.
- We are an active member of CAFWA-SA, bringing the voice of Carers to their work as representatives of NGO's providing child protection services. CFC-SA works alongside other uniquely representative peaks in this forum, namely CREATE, who bring the voice of children and young people, and Grandparents For Grandchildren SA (GFGSA), who bring the voice of grandparent carers (those not registered as kinship carers).
- Our CEO has recently been appointed to the Child Safety and Wellbeing Advisory Panel by the Minister, joining with Government and NGOs to contribute to the implementation of child protection system reforms.
- We have regular meetings scheduled with DCP, including with the Chief Executive, Cathy Taylor and Director, Brette Schumann and the Office of the Minister for Education and Child Development with Adviser – Child Protection, Rachael Grauwelman-Smith.

Inform

- The recent Carer Forum also provided learning opportunities. The group heard from DCP staff and two Carers on the processes and challenges associated with an application for Other Person Guardianship (OPG). The group was also addressed by Cathy Taylor, CEO of DCP, in a Q&A format (following on from a previous session held in December 2016 where CFC-SA welcomed Cathy and introduced her to Carers at a General Meeting).

- We have recently refreshed and significantly improved our website. The site now provides up to date information and answers to 'frequently asked questions'. It is mobile and tablet friendly. The site has been designed for growth and is being updated regularly. Its content can be readily updated and our intention is for it to become a 'one stop shop' and 'front door' for information relevant to the Carer community, our partners and other interested persons, including potential foster and kinship carers.
- We have updated our brochure to define and promote CFC-SA services. Supplies of the brochure are being regularly distributed to foster care agencies and other stakeholders to include in orientation and information packs for Carers. CFC-SA is careful to ensure that our services complement existing services or meet areas of support or need not currently available.
- We prepare and distribute newsletters regularly for mail out to all foster and kinship carers in SA, with plans to distribute 4 per year (one each school term), an increase from 3 times per year. Changes from Term 3 2017 will see this newsletter distributed electronically rather than relying on the mail out process from DCP. This improvement will reduce costs for CFC-SA and DCP, reduce the distribution time and is a more environmentally-friendly option.
- We regularly disseminate information to the wider Carer community through our Facebook page. Since the employment of an Administration Officer we are better able to plan and schedule posts around relevant events, awareness days and share current news.
- We have recently applied for a DCSI small grant of \$4,950 for 'CFC-SA Books for children & young people to connect with Carers' – seeking to purchase resources to distribute to families. The books are age appropriate and cover relevant topics (including being in care, trauma and starting school), and are designed to aid communication and connection between children and young people in care with their Carer families. The samples of these resources were very well regarded by Carers who snapped up limited supplies at a recent event.

Much of the above has been achieved in a very short time and with limited funding – and demonstrates our determination, commitment and capability. Additional funding will allow us to further professionalise our organisation and expand our services, with a focus on the Royal Commission recommendations. In this endeavour, we welcome oversight by the funding body and are ready to apply appropriate qualitative and quantitative reporting mechanisms to measure outcomes and the impact of our services.

We have strong, productive and positive relationships with other relevant organisations.

The appointment of a CEO has also enabled us to develop and strengthen our professional relationships with other relevant organisations including:

- Office of the Minister for Education and Child Development, Hon. Susan Close MP;
- Rachel Sanderson MP, State Member for Adelaide and Shadow Minister for Child Protection;
- The Department of Child Protection (DCP);
- Foster care agencies (statewide):
 - Aboriginal Family Support Services
 - Anglican Community Care
 - Anglicare SA
 - Baptist Care SA
 - Centacare
 - Centacare Catholic Diocese Port Pirie
 - Key Assets
 - Life Without Barriers
 - Lutheran Community Care
 - Time for Kids
 - UnitingCare Wesley Adelaide Homelink SA
 - UnitingCare Wesley Country;
- Kinship care team at DCP;
- Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (GCYP);
- CREATE Foundation - the national peak consumer body representing the voices of children and young people with an out-of-home care experience (including kinship care);
- CAFWA-SA;
- GFGSA;
- Australian Centre for Child Protection, UNISA;
- Health and Community Services Complaints Commissioner (HCSCC);
- the Ombudsman; and
- our interstate counterparts (in particular, Foster Care Queensland, the peak body in that state).

Our recent interactions with these organisations include:

- CFC-SA has regular meetings with the Office of the Minister for Education and Child Development, Minister Close's Adviser – Child Protection, Rachael Grauwelman-Smith, to discuss current issues, child protection reform developments and to provide updates on the progress of CFC-SA. Rachael has stated her appreciation for the progress CFC-SA has achieved since the inception of paid staff;
- Rachel Sanderson MP, State Member for Adelaide and Shadow Minister for Child Protection, is an Associate Member of CFC-SA and is in regular contact over current issues, most recently the draft legislation and subsequent amendments;

- CFC-SA meets regularly and has had additional interactions with Cathy Taylor, DCP Chief Executive, since she joined DCP in late 2016. Cathy has also been available for two Q&A sessions at CFC-SA events, responding to Carers enquiries from the floor and acknowledging concerns, often stating “we can do better” and asking Carers to share their positive experiences with DCP to highlight areas working well;
- Brette Schumann, DCP Director has attended the above regular meetings with Cathy since joining DCP from the Attorney-General’s Department. CFC-SA has also met with Brette in relation to concerns over the 2017 Bill presented to Parliament, with Brette acknowledging the penalties in the Bill for Carers were inclusive of residential care services and removing the imprisonment penalties and reducing the fines from \$50K to \$10K;
- Robyn Skilbeck, DCP Assistant Director, Statewide Services prepared and delivered an OPG session at CFC-SA Forum for Carers (notes available on our website) and has agreed to facilitate a follow up session for Carers to be held later in the year outside regular business hours – to share changes and answer further questions;
- CFC-SA staff and board members have attended or joined various Child Protection Reform Implementation events led by Kathryn Jordan from DCP, including Key Partners Event and Facebook Live interactive sessions to comment and provide input into the reforms;
- Connections with various foster care agencies occurs in a range of ways, including meeting regularly with representatives as a member of CAFWA-SA. CFC-SA has spoken with a Carers Group from Key Assets and presented information to agency support workers from Northern Country Area Services (Centacare Catholic Country SA and UnitingCare Wesley Country SA) attending training in Adelaide – the latter resulting in increased contact from country Carers and agencies;
- CFC-SA has been communicating with Helen Kay, Manager Kinship Care Program, DCP and recently ensured Helen was invited to join the recent meeting held by Raising Children Network to discuss a DSS funded forum with focus on grandparents and kinship carers. Helen operates kinship carer advisory group which is currently looking at its plans for 2017 and has encouraged CFC-SA to be more inclusive of kinship carers. (We look forward to connecting with Helen’s replacement as she has recently retired);
- We have endorsed the Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care and champion the rights of children and young people, ensuring connection by way of referrals to the Guardian for Children and Young People where appropriate. CFC-SA has been promoting GCYP materials at events and ensuring Carers know about this service and GCYP’s role as advocates for children and young persons;
- CFC-SA shares information regularly on our Facebook page in relation to events and other initiatives for children and young people run by CREATE across South Australia;
- We are in regular attendance at CAFWA-SA general meetings, training and other events, including CEO forums and taster events, to connect with the NGO sector and agencies and to provide the Carer perspective to a range of topics;
- CFC-SA often receives calls from grandparent carers who are not registered kinship carers and refers callers to the service offered by GFGSA, with cross-referrals coming from GFGSA from grandparents contacting their agency who are registered kinship carers;

- Recently, we met with Deputy Commission, Sandy Edwards, who confirmed HCSCC are hearing from Carers. Sandy advised HCSCC want to see that Carers have exhausted other avenues when considering referrals. CFC-SA shared information about services and welcomed cross-referrals, particularly where they hear from Carers who may be seeking to connect with other Carers for peer support;
- Deputy Ombudsman Emily Strickland also gave us her time to discuss current system issues. The Ombudsman invites contact from Carers and/or CFC-SA where authorised to act on behalf of Carers. Future changes in the new legislation relating to SACAT mean Carers will access that service ahead of Ombudsman. CFC-SA will want to ensure Carers receive information about changes and additional support to navigate new systems as they become available; and
- CFC-SA joins together with the state and territory peak bodies annually at the National Foster & Kinship Care Conference (this year to be held in Melbourne in September), bringing together foster and kinship carers, young people, sector colleagues and other experts such as researchers and childhood professionals from across Australia and the globe.

CFC-SA is a member of:

- Australian Foster & Kinship Carer Partnership;
- International Foster Care Organisation (IFCO) (awaiting confirmation);
- Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) (awaiting confirmation);
- South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS);
- CAFWA-SA; and
- Volunteering SA&NT.

In addition, CFC-SA has recently supported or endorsed initiatives including:

- Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care with the Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People;
- The Home Stretch Campaign – extending care for young people to age 21;
- Family Matters, signing the Statement of Commitment which reflects our intent to work collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their organisations. This is Australia's national campaign to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people grow up safe and cared for in family, community and culture. Family Matters aims to eliminate the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait children in out-of-home care by 2040; and
- Providing a letter of support for CREATE Foundation's plan to strengthen connections with children and young people in regional South Australia, and to engage with Aboriginal people in the Port Augusta region and beyond.

These connections and relationships give us a deep and nuanced understanding of the sector; an established relationship with, and respect for, all who work in it; and a demonstrated commitment to work with all groups for the benefit of Carers and the children and young people they nurture.

Our strategy also calls for connections outside of the child protection sector and we aim to work creatively and innovatively with philanthropic organisations, other Government agencies and the corporate sector to raise awareness of foster and kinship care and to draw various types of support for our work as a peak body and for the benefit of children and young people in care.

Proper resourcing will enable CFC-SA to better meet our longstanding mandate – to **advocate, support, connect** and **inform** – and assist the DCP to meet the recommendations of the Royal Commission.

We have long taken the view that it is our mandate to assist Carers in four ways – to **advocate** for them (and through them, for the children and young people in their care), to **support** them in their role as Carers, to **connect** them to each other (especially to peer support) and to the wider sector, and to provide them with **information**.

We remain of the view that this clear and wide mandate is appropriate. We believe advocating for Carers, together with the provision of information and educational materials, enables us to deliver a rounded service. Advocacy helps us to understand the issues and the knowledge gaps. Information and education provision helps us to fill those gaps. One organisation can, in our view, comfortably and efficiently perform both tasks. This dual role (advocacy and education) is currently provided by two of our interstate comparable peak bodies – Foster Care Queensland (FCQ) and Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV). FCQ deliver training sessions specifically to help Carers understand legal processes and court applications, among others, and they have offered to share their intellectual property with CFC-SA when legislation passes so that Carers in SA can be informed.

At the moment CFC-SA has funding for 2 staff members only (one working 0.8 FTE and one working 0.2FTE). Both work at home on their kitchen tables! This level of resourcing is manifestly inadequate.

With a view to expanding our services and in light of the Commissioner’s recommendations, CFC-SA recently (and rather boldly) made a submission for increased funding through the state’s new Unsolicited Bids process (submitted to Office of the State Coordinator-General, Department of the Premier and Cabinet on 28 February 2017). It sets what we see as our minimum resource requirements to undertake the work expected of a peak body of our kind, at a time of critical change. It calls for 8 full time equivalent staff and associated resources (for example, premises) to expand service delivery and operate a state-wide service. This proposal also sets out the benefits to the State, including:

- additional economic activity with an additional 7.0 FTE employed to deliver services; and
- assisting with the Government’s strategic priorities, specifically, “Every chance for every child” and “Safe communities, healthy neighbourhoods”.

Staffing at this level will still leave us well short of the resources provided to our interstate counterparts, where we are aware they are well established and delivering support to Carers, for example:

- Foster Care Queensland (FCQ) operates with a budget of approximately \$1.22m and delivers services from 2 sites with 10 paid staff (approximately 9.0 FTE); and
- Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV), whose base income in 2015/16 was \$825k, is currently coordinating the delivery of a new \$2.1m strategy for training and support of kinship and foster carers.

Given the changes occurring in South Australia following the release of the Commission Report and the ongoing child protection reform, Carers will need access to information and support to understand their rights. While our work has a clear focus on Carers, CFC-SA will also work in partnership with DCP and others in the child protection sector to share the voice of Carers and to promote understanding of areas working well and areas for further improvement in the views of Carer families.

CFC-SA is uniquely positioned to expand and continue its established work as a peak body for Carers and is poised to deliver a broader independent advocacy service and ensure Carers are informed and supported to sustain and flourish while assuming their fundamental role within the child protection system. With adequate resourcing, we believe we can continue to improve the services we provide through various means, including those noted in the following table.

Improving CFC-SA services
<p>ADVOCATE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the amount and quality of independent, individual advocacy services for Carers to access and exercise their rights (Recommendation 116). • Build our workforce of skilled advocates who understand the system and can help Carers identify issues, communicate clearly and propose solutions to matters that affect them and the children and young people in their care. • Act as an agent for Carers in court proceedings. • Influence positive changes to attitudes, policies, systems and laws to ensure Carers are recognised as an essential part of the child protection system.

SUPPORT

- Safeguard and promote the rights of Carers and the children and young people in their care through training, information, support and guidance.
- Contribute to the retention of Carers, and thereby improve recruitment of new Carers via word-of-mouth.
- Additional provision of peer support, including court companion services.
- Build volunteer capacity and develop a volunteer workforce to deliver appropriate peer support.
- Introduce student placements and offer positive placement experiences, benefiting from the investment through development of resources and activities. Initial thoughts in this area (dependent upon level and nature of student's course) include:
 - development of a fact sheet for kinship carers about what to expect after you become a kinship carer;
 - a comparison paper which looks at foster and kinship care in terms of 'volunteering'; and
 - an analysis of the 'cost of caring' – reflecting the dollar savings foster and kinship carers provide to the State.
- Increase capacity for special projects, for example CFC-SA submitted a project proposal in November 2016 to conduct exit interviews for foster and kinship carers, presenting a project plan and drawing from existing projects operating in ACT and Queensland to undertake a 12 month trial. The purpose of conducting exit interviews is to receive feedback from Carers about their experiences to improve aspects of the system, understand what can be done better to retain Carers, and to help reduce the high turnover of Carers. CFC-SA believes collection of information from Carers exiting care through a central source will lead to changes that may see significant improvements in foster and kinship care and enhance the recruitment and retention of Carers.

CONNECT

- Deliver effective consultation, coordination, communication and education on issues and activities affecting the Carer community.
- Work in partnership with DCP and other key stakeholders on child protection reform.
- Contribute towards development of regulations, government policy and practice development, providing a Carer's perspective (formed from practical experience and directly impacting upon children and young people in care).
- Participate in research to build the evidence base, for example we have had preliminary discussions with two researchers who are keen to look at the following areas we have identified as priorities:
 1. Extending 'early intervention' strategies to include foster and kinship carer families, to better understand how to sustain placements and reduce the poor outcomes for children and young people who are having multiple placements (e.g. 11 homes before age 14); and
 2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander over-representation in the child protection system, dealing with a national issue at the state level.

INFORM

- Develop education materials which clearly describes Carers rights to contribute to decision making, and their rights of review regarding decisions which affect them (Recommendation 117).
- Assist Carers to deal with the relevant authorities and agencies in relation to administrative and legal processes associated with the children and young people in their care.
- Provide Carers with the information they need to understand and navigate the South Australian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (SACAT).
- Communicate changes to Carers regarding other systems and processes, e.g. OPG.
- Support Carers to access information about a range of relevant services and topics.
- Help Carers to understand, identify and recognise risks to the children and young people in their care and respond appropriately to inappropriate or harmful behaviour.
- Deliver information sessions in a variety of methods to reach Carers across South Australia.
- Raise the profile of foster and kinship care with the broader community.

Proper resourcing will also enable CFC-SA to assist the Department to meet the recommendations of the Royal Commission. Commissioner Nyland's report made 260 recommendations. Most of those recommendations have been accepted by the state. The challenge for us all is to now get on with meeting those recommendations.

The following table outlines the recommendations CFC-SA will be able to support across advocacy, information sharing and promotion, training, peer support, research, access and referral, representation on panels and policy development:

Recommendations	Goal	Summary
116, 117, 127	Advocacy	Individual advocacy service, ensuring complaints processes are known and supporting Carers to follow and raise areas of concern appropriately.
1, 9, 39, 46, 52, 54, 57, 60, 63, 64, 68b, 72, 75, 77, 78, 80, 81, 84, 92, 95, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 119, 121, 123, 153, 156, 157, 158, 161, 162, 165, 166, 169, 172, 189, 204, 223, 225, 245, 256	Information sharing & promotion	Communicating changes to foster and kinship carers. Supporting Carers to recognise and support the voice of the child and to ensure the child or young person is included in decision making to the extent that they are capable and willing.
22, 23, 24c, 30, 34d, 44d, 52, 53, 71, 102, 104, 112, 113, 117, 120, 125, 126, 131, 140, 201, 205, 221	Training	Includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of a peer education session focused on foster and kinship carers. - Child Safe Environments Train-the-Trainer.
106, 137, 157, 158, 191	Peer support	Development of a peer education workforce from experienced foster and kinship carers
28, 124	Research	Connecting with research institutions to facilitate evidence-based approaches to best practice in foster and kinship care
1, 25, 45, 57, 67, 68b, 80, 84, 95, 108, 109, 112, 153, 157, 161, 165, 169, 189, 223	Access & referral	Supporting Carers to gain access to appropriate services to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sustain their caring role; - improve their caring capacity; and - enhance their wellbeing.
86, 87, 118, 155, 215, 243	Representation on panels	Carer representation on expert panels.
90, 114, 115, 127, 179, 229, 235, 256	Policy & practice development	Providing feedback from Carers on policies and practice guidelines.

We understand, and can meet, the challenges associated with providing the services recommended by the Commissioner.

The protection of children and young people in SA is undertaking a complete overhaul. We recognise that this brings considerable challenges – for all who work in and with the sector.

These challenges include:

- improving the retention and recruitment of foster and kinship carers;
- reducing the number of children and young people accessing commercial and residential care;
- keeping the Carer community up to date with the changes and their implications;
- supporting Carers to work together with DCP to build relationships of trust and to effectively resolve issues;
- ensuring demand for CFC-SA services is matched by available resources;
- introducing advocacy support for Carers who appeal decisions via SACAT;
- provision of a state-wide service, accessible by all foster and kinship carers when and where they need it;
- addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care;
- maintaining family, community and cultural connections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are not placed in accordance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle;
- maintaining family, community and cultural connections for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children in care who are not placed with kinship carers;
- ceasing the practice of ‘abrupt’ removals of children and young people from Carer families (N.B. ‘abrupt’ does not refer to ‘emergency’ removals where a child or young person’s safety is a priority);
- supporting Carers to access essential therapy and other services for children and young people in their care;
- building the evidence base and research in relation to foster and kinship care;
- introducing innovation and change across all elements of the current system; and
- raising the profile of foster and kinship care in the wider community.

One of the most significant challenges for CFC-SA's work with Carers relates to the relationship Carers have with the Department and the perceived lack of respect, creating a culture of distrust. Rebuilding a relationship of trust and respect is a fundamental pre-requisite to the retention and recruitment of Carers.

CFC-SA offers a bridge for Carers and DCP to rebuild that relationship. CFC-SA hopes to continue its work with:

- the various sections of the DCP on practice, policy and improving the culture 'on the ground' – recognising that it will ultimately benefit the children and young people in the child protection system;
- Carers to shift their perceptions of DCP and the system – to see adults working together in a positive way and effectually role modelling for the benefit of the children and young people in their care;
- Carers and DCP, aiming to highlight best practice and showcase positive aspects of the system so that Carers can see genuine improvement in practice; and
- Foster care agencies to support the recruitment and retention of Carers.

A place in a residential or commercial care facility is still more expensive and, crucially, less effective than care and support in the community. Spending money in this way will do little to tackle the fundamental problem: too many children and young people are entering the child protection system, they are staying in the system too long and failing to give them the care they need in homes with families.

Research shows children and young people experience better psychological outcomes when they are in stable care arrangements. Foster and kinship carers who are supported to sustain family-based care will reduce the instability and the number of children and young people who have experienced high numbers of placements – in SA this is well above the national average.

There is a further challenge for consideration that is not often identified – Carers do not see a 'child in care', rather they see a child who is now part of their family. Carers volunteer their time and open their homes and hearts to children and young people who would otherwise not be part of family. Carers do not clock on at 9am and knock off at 5pm, they do not arrive for their volunteering at a workplace for 3 hours on a Tuesday, they are 'parents' in every sense of the word and make themselves available to meet all the needs of their child, for whatever the length of that relationship, and generally consider children and young people who have shared their home to be a part of their family for life. They willingly (and sometimes unwillingly) ensure their child does all the things the child protection system demands of them, and deal with the fall out from visitations with birth parents, therapy and past trauma.

When Carers speak of feeling undervalued, they are referring to the times when they have asked for help – to replace a broken item and DCP has offered them half the cost of repairs; the times when their child's GP has suggested therapeutic support from a young age, they ask and ask and ask without success and their child starts kindly with developmental delays and subsequent

behavioural issues which could have otherwise been avoided; the times when a young person is removed from them, the only home and parent some have known, when on a walk around the block while the Carer is told to pack a bag of their things and not given a chance to say goodbye; ‘Undervalued’ is not strong enough a word.

It is difficult for non-Carers to comprehend how this can happen, in fact it is difficult to understand why Carers are not shown sincere appreciation and rewarded for their generous efforts. In addition, Carers can offer practical alternatives and suggestions which support both the stability of placements for children and young people and the retention of Carers – offering innovative solutions and alternatives to support their families. The following ideas have evolved from recent discussions with Carers:

- **Therapeutic Respite Program**

This program is a concept based on information shared by a foster carer acknowledging their family is struggling with their teen’s challenging behaviours (school and home) while acknowledging that things are going well for their teen’s younger sibling. The family does not want this placement to end but does need a break and for behaviours to change.

A Therapeutic Respite Program could include a range of therapies, education, visits to facilities and independent living, talks with mentors, career guidance, and a whole host of other tailored activities. Such a program could occur over a relatively short period of time, e.g. 4 weeks, and be designed to engage and support small groups of children and young people. Support for the family to continue caring, to understand behaviours and better interact at home could also be a key part of the Program.

- **Access to Home and Personal Care Services**

This service would operate in a similar way to the support offered to help older people stay independent in their homes. Carers have expressed that sometimes respite is not needed and upsets routines, also that ‘professional’ respite means the Carer must leave their home and find alternative accommodation at cost, but that they would love a hand with housework, garden maintenance and other flexible support options. It seems some Carers can access some types of help, but there is no consistency.

- **Grief and Trauma Counselling for Carers**

Carers can sometimes experience significant grief and trauma due to their caring experiences. Most recently, CFC-SA is aware Carers have been grieving as a result of removals, placement breakdowns, decisions to stop care, reunification and various other events which affect them within the child protection system. Some Carers have stated “never again” and others are hesitant about returning to a caring role; others say they actively make a point of telling people who might be considering caring not to do it.

Access to grief and trauma counselling services, on similar basis to an Employee Assistance Program, could be of benefit and may lead to some Carers remaining available and/or returning to a caring role faster, and potentially improve the message given to other potential Carers.

With the growth of kinship care, CFC-SA seeks to be more inclusive of kinship carers and the board is in agreement and already planning to propose a name change to “Connecting Foster & Kinship Carers – SA Inc” be voted on by Members at our AGM this year. While there are many commonalities between foster and kinship care, there are many differences, and expansion of services will see CFC-SA better able to understand and support kinship carers, work closely with other services providers, including GFGSA as around half of all kinship carers are grandparents, and work more closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to meet the Placement Principles and to ensure non-Aboriginal carers are able to support the cultural needs of Aboriginal children and young people in their care.

In addition, we anticipate a rise in enquiries regarding adoption given Recommendation 157 from the Commission Report and coinciding with progress in other states and territories, especially New South Wales where recently they have extended financial support for children and young people following adoption. CFC-SA wants to be able to respond to enquiries from Carers and the general community about open adoption in South Australia.

Finally, we acknowledge the true scale of the challenges ahead must also consider various broader socio-economic factors, including:

- an aging population;
- rising costs of living;
- more women in the workforce;
- changing gender roles;
- professional people, particularly those who risk their livelihood if DCSI clearance is affected;
- access to legal rights;
- access to adoption (local, interstate and overseas); and
- impact of alcohol and other drugs, particularly rising amphetamine use.

We look forward to working with the Early Intervention Research Directorate, and others, to address these issues for the benefit of children and young people in care.

As stated in the Commission Report, ‘... *the Minister will rely on the care services of others, including foster parents or other suitable persons, to discharge the responsibility of guardianship*’. CFC-SA offers Carer families a fundamental service to explore the challenges and celebrate the successes of caring for children and young people, and to contribute towards significant and sustainable improvements across the child protection system.