

Feedback on Proposed Bill: Carers Recognition Act 2021



To:	The Hon Suzanne Orr MLA Attention: Jason Clarke
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From:	Barnardos Australia
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Subject	Feedback on Proposed Bill – Carers Recognition Act 2021
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Barnardos Australia (Barnardos) thanks the Labor Member for Yerrabi, The Hon Suzanne Orr MLA, for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Carers Recognition Act 2021.

Overarching Statement

Barnardos Australia (Barnardos) is a large not for profit children's social care organisation, providing family support and out-of-home care (OOHC) to approximately 15,000 children and their families in New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) each year.

Barnardos' services and programs target vulnerable children at risk of separation from their families and statutory removal into OOHC. Our services are targeted to the most vulnerable communities where child at risk notifications to statutory departments are high, with associated child removal rates into OOHC. For over 100 years, Barnardos has worked with children, young people and families to break the cycle of disadvantage, creating safe, nurturing and stable homes for children, connected to family and community.

Barnardos works with families as they are experiencing the toughest of times. Our practice is child-centred, multifaceted and evidence-based. Our longstanding experience as a leading Australian service provider, combined with a strong commitment to research, and the need for evidence-based practice, means that we are able to specialise in working with the most vulnerable children and families. This extensive experience, understanding and commitment informs our views on the effectiveness of the child protection and social services systems in responding to vulnerable children and families.

Barnardos provides kinship and foster care services and support for approximately 1,500 children and young people each year. Barnardos takes seriously our commitment to breaking the cycle of disadvantage, creating safe, nurturing and stable homes, connected to family and community. Barnardos is committed to ensuring compliance with the Children and Young People Act 2008 and recognises our carers as integral to fulfilling this commitment to children and young people.

ACT Together is a Consortium in the ACT comprised of Barnardos, OzChild and the Australian Childhood Foundation responsible for the delivery of OOHC for vulnerable children and young people under *A Step Up For Our Kids Strategy*.

As the lead agency of ACT Together, Barnardos is committed to continuous quality improvement to ensure that we understand, assist and support carers in the critical role they play as a primary support and healing influence in the life of a child or young person. Barnardos/ACT Together seeks to ensure that the relationship between carer and the organisation is healthy, consultative, transparent and professional.

As part of our acknowledgement of the integral part that carers play, ACT Together has established a number of mechanisms through which to obtain feedback, noting that the system is dynamic to support our reflective approach based on a system of continuous improvement.

Feedback is collected from carers through a number of mechanisms:

A Step-Up for Our Kids

- Carer Wellbeing Sub-Committee- chaired by Barnardos
- Carer Survey – commissioned by the ACT Together Carer Wellbeing Sub-Committee

Carers ACT

- Monthly meetings between ACT Together and Carers ACT to discuss carer wellbeing, opportunities and any systemic issues

ACT Together

- Service Feedback - Complaints and Compliments. A unified approach from ACT Together Consortium partners was considered critical to ensuring high quality service provision across the agency and in recognition of the interconnectedness of the service under ACT Together. As clients may be utilising or engaging with one or more Consortium partners this feedback model was implemented to ensure ease of use for clients.

Barnardos

- Carer Annual Review
- Carer Support Inbox
- Carer Support staff interactions
- Caseworker interaction (also undertaken by OzChild)
- Care Team Meetings (also undertaken by OzChild). The care team includes the carer, CYPS, ACT Together caseworker and other professionals (teachers, medical professionals).

Barnardos supports the premise of the Carers Recognition Act 2021. The intent to recognise, promote and value the role of carers, including our foster and kinship carers aligns with our values as an organisation (see [Barnardos Strategic Directions](#) and [ACT Together Strategic Plan](#)) and our day to day practice.

ACT Together has taken a very strong focus on the engagement of carers in the development of policies and procedures, including facilitating feedback via focus groups, email correspondence, survey monkey and through peak bodies such as the Carer Wellbeing Sub-Committee, chaired by Barnardos.

One of the key features of ACT Together is the support provided to carers through our Carer Support Team. Children in care have a caseworker, carers caring through ACT Together have access to support through the Carer Support Program.

The caseworker for the child is involved in aspects of the child's care and supports the placement in a general way, this includes requests for contingencies, arranging contact, home visits, supporting carers in behaviour management, organising reviews of arrangements etc.

Carer support is there for carers – Foster and Kinship. Carer Support Workers have a range of experience in caring (foster and kin), case management and providing support to caring families.

The role of carer support includes debriefing, advocacy, referral to other services, annual reviews and checks. The Carer Support Worker also supports the carer during a Reportable Conduct investigation, as separate to the caseworker who would support the child.

The Carer Support team regularly organises carer coffee and support groups and special events as a way to build carer support networks.

Barnardos are highly committed to the ongoing wellbeing of carers. This is also a topic that is discussed at Carer Wellbeing Sub-Committee with outcomes including, but not limited to:

- the development of a Carer Handbook (co-authored by Child, Youth and Protection Services)
- the creation of information and resources for carers around selfcare and secondary trauma
- video training series focused on carers experience, featuring ACT Together carers speaking about 'when it's worked well – what has it looked like' to assist caseworkers to understand carers experiences. This training was delivered in a series of videos that refer to:
 - Communication – type, timeliness, responsiveness and need for clear pathways
 - Terminology
 - Timely processing of administration including financial processing of payments
 - Decision making – carers have a right to have a say in decisions and to have decisions and the rationale explained to them
 - Power imbalance with professionals
 - Ways to work that help carers feel valued and respected
 - Helping caseworkers to understand what motivates carers in their role.

Implications

Our Primary Client

ACT Together acknowledges that the OOHC system is reliant upon the commitment of our foster and kinship carers and their willingness to provide a home for a child who cannot live with their birth parents.

At the same time, the OOHC sector has the child as the central priority and ACT Together has a primary responsibility to the child. We note also that the Child and Young Persons Act 2008 requires that the Best Interest of the Child is paramount (s8).

ACT Together has developed processes for consultation through care teams, case worker interaction and carer, seeking to ensure that carers views are held.

It is important to remember that the Children and Young People Act 2008 requires all decision making about children be based on the concept of 'best interests of the child' to ensure their needs are prioritised above all other considerations – including the needs of any involved adults. In making such decisions, the Act also requires that the views and wishes of the child involved are obtained and acknowledged in recording key decisions. This means that at times, decisions may be made that do not align with the hopes/wishes of a carer.

Contractual relationship around support provided

As highlighted, ACT Together is a consortium of organisations led by Barnardos Australia and includes the Australian Childhood Foundation and OzChild.

ACT Together provides a continuum of care to meet the changing needs of vulnerable children and young people. Under the Consortium, Barnardos has lead responsibility for specific activities relating to carers including carer assessment, training and support. This work however is branded as ACT Together in recognition of the Consortium approach to these issues.

The specific activities with carers are identified within our contractual relationship with the ACT Government. In the event of any proposed reforms to enhance carer wellbeing and experience, Barnardos would welcome being a participant in the design process. However, it is important to note that additional resourcing may be required as an outcome of the implementation.

Reporting on the Act

As an OOHC agency there are a number of agencies for which Barnardos/ACT Together is accountable to, is audited by, and provides regular reporting to.

Noting this would constitute a new reporting obligation on ACT Together, additional resourcing would be required from the ACT Government to implement.

State and Territory Equivalents

In reviewing other equivalent State and Territory Carer Recognition legislation it is useful to note some differences, particularly with the identified issues for ACT Together/Barnardos. In NSW, SA and WA legislation, foster and kinship carers are not covered by the legislation.

Legislation in QLD and SA does not impose the same reporting requirements for organisations, for example SA specifically only requires Government Departments to provide a report against the requirement of the Act.

It is unclear why there are differentials between states and territory legislation.

Extension of Function

Barnardos supports the requirement that care relationship principles in relation to employees who are carers are recognised by organisations. However, organisations are required to ensure that they maintain a clear delineation in their relationships with and obligations to employees versus carers.

We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss any aspect of our feedback.

Please contact Ms Elizabeth Cox, Executive Leader, Practice Quality on (02) 4302 5602 or ecox@barnardos.org.au.