



Review of out-of-home care costs and pricing  
Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal  
PO Box K35  
Haymarket Post Shop  
Sydney NSW 1240

7 May 2025

Dear Tribunal,

**Submission on review of out-of-home care costs and pricing (IPART)**

Adopt Change believes that every child has the right to grow up in a safe, nurturing and permanent family home, and that all families need the appropriate supports for children to thrive.

Adopt Change works towards every child having access to a safe, nurturing and stable family upbringing. We recognise the impact of childhood trauma, and provide a number of services and education, so that children and families can be supported and thrive. We also work with government, sector and community to seek changes to legislation and policies to better provide for children and families.

Adopt Change operates My Forever Family NSW, a program contracted by DCJ to provide support, recruitment, training and services for kinship & foster carers, guardians and adoptive parents from out of home care.

The purpose of this submission is to respond to the IPART draft report dated March 2025. It is provided on behalf of both Adopt Change (including the My Forever Family NSW program).

Draft decisions on recruitment, assessing and training carers:

Recruiting carers is significant challenge with the number of available carer homes being simply not enough to ensure that every child in care is living in home-based care. It is our view that our society, and economy have changed and will continue to change, accordingly the out of home care system needs to pivot to be able to recruit and maintain carers (this critical element is often overlooked).

Baby boomers are ageing out of carers role, Generation X have typically had children later and are caring for aged parents, and Millennials have a reduced propensity for family and care responsibilities. Additionally, there is a cost-of-living crisis and very real issues with housing availability and affordability across NSW.

The sum-total of these factors means that becoming or remaining a carer in today's society and economy, is no longer a viable or sustainable option for many Australians. This in addition to the negative experience of many carers being enough of an impetus to publicly



vocalise their views, or even leave the system, further reducing the likelihood of retention and recruitment of a sufficient number of carers for children and young people.

The role of a carer is voluntary, time-consuming and requires navigation of a complex service system. Carers can feel overwhelmed, isolated and unclear of where to access help when their role becomes challenging. This impacts carers' ability to maintain stable placements, their own wellbeing and the longevity of their caring role. Carers often experience vicarious trauma through caring for children and young people with adverse childhood experiences and have little to no support in navigating the impacts of this.

When considering the costs of "recruiting a new carer", there is a deeper consideration. It is globally evidenced that the best way to recruit a new carer is through positive word of mouth of an existing carer. A marketing campaign across advertising and social media channels has limited success, when the landscape is:

- i. a financially unviable role in an economically difficult time (needing a home big enough, a flexible enough work role, or own funds to support the decision to care for a child with trauma); and
- ii. there are many carers who will advise others against taking on a carer role, let alone promote it, due to their own difficult experience of the role.

Carer support is a vital step to fund, prior to promoting the role further to recruit potential carers. This needs to be funded through:

- i. an independent program that represents the interests of carers so that they can sustain their role; and
- ii. adequate financial supports to make the caring role viable and sustainable.

A per carer amount, based on the number of carers and the number of children they are caring for, should be determined to adequately cover the cost of living with a child/children with high needs in their home. The therapeutic and other needs of the child also needs to be covered, to ensure the placement is stable and sustainable.

Once this is funded, recruitment of new carers will become a much easier task. Positive word of mouth is free. If the role is viable, more people will consider taking it on. And if permanency is an option (when in the best interests of the child) and financially and therapeutically supported, it will open even more homes.

Recruitment marketing and nurturing costs are small in comparison. Thousands through to hundreds of thousands can be spent on a marketing campaign. It will be futile without the underpinning support outlined above. Follow up of potential carers, however, is key. This should ensure that if an interested party does make an enquiry, they are swiftly responded to, informed and provided a clear, transparent and timely (while robust) process of being considered as a carer.



Potential carer/carers training or education is a vital part of ensuring the potential carer is suitable and knows what they are taking on and where to go for support. Shared Lives Training (pre-authorisation) is limited in its capacity to do this as it is brief and forms part of the pre-assessment process. It has been flagged by various carers and avenues that training and support are core, from early on.

Currently post-authorisation training is extremely variable. The requirement via OCG for an agency to regularly ensure a carer is undertaking "training" could be to access one webinar externally to the agency or could be regular in-depth relevant topics provided by the agency. This is in large part influenced by either an agency who enforces a certain amount of training (or in other cases, minimal requirements) or a motivated carer, seeking to soak up as much education support as possible to parent the children in their care.

Training is something that is more important for a carer to be able to access as needed. A "training" pool of funds should be made available by the department or agency of the carer, per carer, with the representative program being funded to provide enough supplementary training across the core topics as possible – from pre-caring role, early stages of caring through to specific needs such as parenting teens with trauma and caring for children with various specific conditions and needs.

**Adopt Change submits that the draft amounts proposed in relation to recruiting a new carer and supporting a carer via training are potentially sufficient. This however, is dependent on a strong, well-funded carer retention strategy, as outlined above.**

**Adopt Change submits that supporting carers to update and improve their skills is critical to the well-being of children and young people in care. All children and young people in care have experienced trauma, even simply from their removal from their family of origin and home environment. Given this, ensuring that carers are well trained is crucial to providing excellent quality care and helping children and young people in care thrive.**

**In addition, Adopt Change submits that there should be a modest funding amount each year allocated to maintain carers. This amount should be used specifically to address retention issues and should be used flexibly to support the carer. For example, it could allow for a yearly check in meeting with the carer and their agency/case worker specifically about their caring journey, their views and experience. It should allow for carers to access support services such as counselling, carer coaching and other services, to ensure they are coping with the demands of caring without causing detriment to their own wellbeing (where EAP is not ordinarily available). It could also be used to fund resources for carers such as books, conferences or training courses that the carer has identified would help them in their caring journey. Adopt Change estimate that \$1,000 per year per carer would make a significant difference. As at 30 December 2024, there were 15,561 carers in NSW and \$1,000 towards maintaining those carers might have a considerable effect on carer retention.**



Increase to care allowance/changes to costs related to raising kids:

Adopt Change strongly support an increase to the care allowance for foster, kinship and relative carers but consider that a larger amount than the one suggested would be more appropriate given the increase in the cost of living generally and the inability to recruit foster carers throughout New South Wales.

In addition, Adopt Change submit that a comprehensive review of the care allowance should occur more often than the proposed 8-10 years. The world is rapidly changing and a review of this nature needs to be more often so that it can reflect changes to society and the cost of living. The most vulnerable children in Australia ought to be properly supported and their care allowance should reflect current society.

Carers have experienced various pressures over the past few years and as a result have also required more support. This has included the pandemic, floods and economic pressures, on top of the usual pressures of parenting and extra challenges of parenting a child and/or young person with an experience of trauma and the resulting needs.

Economic pressures have also impacted potential carers. The role of carer is on the decline currently and two major factors can dramatically change that trajectory:

- i. **Well supported carers** so that they are retained in their role, provide optimum support to the children in their care and speak positively about their role (for word-of-mouth recruitment); and
- ii. **Financially supported carers** so that it is a viable role to undertake, including ensuring child therapy costs are adequately covered.

All of these factors are continuously 'in-play', despite the fact we know the best way to recruit new carers into the system is word-of-mouth referral from existing carers who are happy, or at least satisfied, with the level of training and support received.

Childhood, and key child development stages, are fleeting so we must act in child-centred timeframes.

**Adopt Change generally supports the increase to the current care allowance, but maintains that even greater supports need to be provided to the carer and the child/ren in their home.**

**Adopt Changes supports a mechanism where the care allowance is adjusted annually for CPI but suggests that this should be CPI plus 1% (as a minimum) to ensure there is no disparity between carer and other households in NSW.**

**In addition, Adopt Change submits that a review of the care allowance should occur at least every 3 years, in order to be more responsive to needs of children and young people in care.**

Medical assessment costing:

Adopt Change has some concerns that by changing the manner in which medical, dental and wellbeing costs are managed, there could be inadvertent gate-keeping by case workers to lower costs which will ultimately affect the care that children and young people are able to access.



Children in care are likely to need additional medical, dental and wellbeing appointments and it is critical that they are offered a gold standard of treatment while in out of home care.

It is well accepted that children and young people in care suffer disadvantage; the true focus should be on a needs basis and not tied to funding in anyway.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), have found that children and young people in care have a greater need for mental health, family, disability, and drug and alcohol services. These results are consistent with other studies that have shown that young people with experience of the care system “come from highly disadvantaged families characterised by poverty, relationship breakdown, substance abuse, violence, disability and mental illness”<sup>1</sup>.

**Adopt Change submits that carefully worded policy should be implemented so that children and young people in out-of-home-care access health services on an as needs basis, no matter how these costs are funded.**

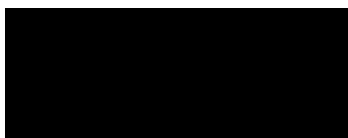
Conclusion:

Adopt Change, including My Forever Family NSW, is committed to supporting carers to sustain them in their role so that they can continue to nurture and care well for the children and young people in their homes. The My Forever Family program is government funded to be a supplementary service across the carer space – providing supplementary activities in recruitment, training, support and advocacy (primarily systemic with limited individual scope). The assigned budget is spread across these areas, with a focus on supporting carers. Increasing carer training and carer support budgets (reviewed on a per-carer amount), will improve carer retention and optimise seeing more carer homes open.

We welcome this review and the potential for improving the carer home network by supporting the volunteer carers who are essential to home-based care for children and their opportunity for healing.

We welcome any other additional opportunity to provide submissions and to discuss the role we can play to further support real and positive change for children and young people in NSW.

Sincerely,



**Renée Leigh (Carter)**

Chief Executive Officer, Adopt Change (operating My Forever Family NSW)

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<sup>1</sup> aihw.gov.au – Child Protection. Available at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2021-22/contents/insights> [Accessed 26 Feb 2024].