



**Hatch Carers Pty Ltd is a community-led social enterprise committed to supporting, empowering, and connecting foster and kinship carer across NSW.**

**Hatch Carers Pty Ltd**, appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback IPART’s Out-of-Home Care Costs and Pricing Interim Report. Carers face numerous challenges in supporting children in Out-of-Home Care (OOHC), a situation intensified by increasing living costs and changing demographics. While financial support is a crucial component, it is only one part of a comprehensive approach needed to stabilise and sustain the carer sector. Hatch Carers supports a reassessment of allowances that considers today’s cost of living and the unique financial realities of being a carer and enabling the attainment of a reasonable standard of living for those in OOHC.

**1. Support for carers to prepare for OOHC.**

Financial pressures are significant with allowances failing to cover essential needs. Carers often move from dual-income to single-income households to dedicate time to caring, sacrificing entitlements like superannuation and paid leave. Hatch Carers supports an annual superannuation contribution based on years of experience, as this would recognise and retain experienced carers while reinforcing the “word-of-mouth appeal” crucial for new recruitment. Additionally, a structured framework for comprehensive, paid training that culminates in formal qualifications would not only enhance carer skills and abilities but also provide a valuable asset for future employment, encouraging a sustainable caregiving community better equipped to manage high-needs children.

**2. Wrap around services to improve wellbeing for children in care.**

Critical support services are often lacking or inconsistent, including psychological resources and tools for managing behavioral and mental health challenges. In many cases, carers are expected to cover costs that should fall under the care allowance, such as travel for birth family contact and psychological services. Hatch Carers has heard of a case where a carer has been asked to cover a \$13,000 orthodontic bill, and many other similar cases requiring a substantial expense. Such requests highlight a gap in understanding what the allowance is intended to cover, putting a strain on carers and impacting the quality of care.

Additionally, many carers are affected by means-tested payments and benefits, which limit access to essential resources such as the Active Kids and Creative Kids vouchers. These programs are designed to promote children’s physical and creative development and are often unavailable to some children in OOHC because of the carer’s income level. This places additional strain on carers who are financially stretched and restricts children’s access to enriching experiences, Hatch Carers recommends eliminating the ‘means tested’ the eligibility criteria for government benefits to ensure children in OOHC and carers can receive these benefits regardless of income.

### **3. Foster Care recruitment and retention strategies.**

Retention of experienced carers is the most effective recruitment strategy. Long-term carers provide newcomers with firsthand insights, showcasing the benefits and challenges of fostering. Experienced carers could be remunerated to mentor those entering the care community for a set period of time ensuring the carer base is not only stabilised but sufficient in number to meet requirements. By addressing financial and non-financial needs, we can foster a stable, experienced carer base that is well prepared to share the true benefits and challenges of fostering. Hatch Carers urges IPART to prioritise retention as a recruitment strategy, ensuring that experienced carers are valued and able to continue sharing their knowledge.

## **Additional Recommendations**

### **4. Clear expectations and boundaries for carers regarding financial arrangements.**

Carers often experience frustration with ambiguous policies around what the care allowance covers, leading to pressure to pay for essential needs, establishing clear boundaries and improving the reimbursement process would allow carers to focus on caring rather than navigating complex financial expectations. A clear clarification as to what the care allowance covers and what children's needs will be addressed by contingency payments would increase transparency.

### **5. Collaboration with Carer Support Organisations**

Increased collaboration with agencies, ACCO's, DCJ and carer support organisations like Hatch Carers would foster a network of resources, guidance and advocacy. Engaging carer-led organisations in policy discussions ensure that carers' insights shape reforms, making support systems more responsive and grounded in caring experiences. This collaboration would also amplify the carer voice in the policy-making process, bringing lived experience directly to decision makers.

### **6. Essential Non-Financial Supports**

Carers require being well prepared to offer care to children often with high needs. Beyond financial supports, carers require advocacy, respite and peer support. Comprehensive introductory training is essential. Carers need to be adequately resourced in terms of their ongoing development and experiential base. Resource development and its delivery are critical supports for carers across the board. Advocacy has long been recognized as a requirement of caring for not only the carers themselves but also for the children in their care as well. The lack of respite options is particularly concerning given the high demands and stresses of caring for children with complex needs. A purposeful network of carer support groups would foster mutual support, reduce isolation, and allow for shared learning. Hatch Carers echoes the recent OCG recommendation for a funded advocacy service to assist carers in navigating the complexities of the OOHC system, advocating for both themselves and the children in their care. All these supports for carers, although non-financial in nature, cost extra to provide but Hatch Carers would maintain they are essential for a viable and vibrant care sector for our children and young people in care. The review is reminded that carers are typically not motivated by financial considerations when they stepped into the role of being a foster/kinship carer but that all of the above supports are now part and parcel of continuing to provide care now and into the future.

Thank you for considering our feedback. We look forward to contributing to a strengthened OOHC system for carers and the children they support.

Kind Regards,

*Hatch Carers Pty Ltd*