



## Cross-sector Foster Carer Panel

### Background

In Western Australia, the Department of Communities (the Department) has the responsibility for children who are in out-of-home care (OOHC) pursuant to the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*. Foster care for these children is provided by the Department and community sector organisations (CSOs), and each agency is responsible for the assessment and approval of their own carers. However, across the OOHC sector, all children should be cared for by carers who have been assessed and approved to a consistently high standard.

The current OOHC system has a number of competing pressures, including increasing numbers of children entering OOHC and the continuing difficulty in recruiting carers. As carers become harder to recruit and retain, safeguards are needed to preserve high standards of care.

Additionally, a high-performing system requires continuous improvement. The current organisation-based assessment and approval process for carers limits the capacity for system-wide learning or continuous improvement.

A key reform action of the Department's *Building a Better Future Out-of-Home Care Reform in Western Australia* reform plan was the establishment of a Cross-Sector Foster Carer Panel (Reform action 59).

In April 2016, the Cross-sector Foster Carer Panel Implementation Group was formed with representation from the Department, CSOs and the Foster Care Association of Western Australia, to further develop the details and processes of a Cross-sector Foster Carer Panel (the Panel).

The purpose of the Panel is to achieve high quality carer standards and improve the care experiences of children and young people. It will do this by monitoring the quality of assessments and providing feedback to the Department or participating CSO, as well as providing ongoing reporting of themes and issues that emerge. The Panel will contribute to the development of good practice across the OOHC sector.

### Role of the Cross-sector Foster Carer Panel

The role of the Panel is to review all carer assessments (other than 'family or significant other carer' assessments) undertaken by the Department and participating CSOs, with a view to endorsing or not endorsing the submitting agency's proposed approval of the carer applicant. The Panel has no authority to approve or not-approve a carer.

*NB. CSOs have the option to use the Panel or their own panel process. The following is applicable to CSOs who choose to opt-in to the Panel.*

The Panel's review of assessment reports will have regard to the competencies outlined in regulation 4 of the *Children and Community Services Regulations 2006*.





**Implementation** of the Panel will be staged:

- April 2017 - the Department commences submitting its carer application assessments to the Panel for endorsement.
- 1 August 2017 - CSOs may commence submitting carer application assessments to the Panel for endorsement.

## Cross-sector Foster Carer Panel membership

The Panel has seven members. A quorum of four is required, with either the Panel Chair or Panel Deputy Chair, and a Department representative to be present as two of the four. The Panel Chair or Panel Deputy Chair has the casting vote in the event of a deadlock. Aboriginal representation will be prioritised.

The Panel's membership comprises:

- Independent Panel Chair
- Independent Deputy Panel Chair
- Community Services Sector representative (on a rotating basis)
- Cultural Consultant
- Senior Department staff representatives
- Foster Carer Association of Western Australia representative.

## Cross-sector Foster Carer Panel process



The Panel will meet weekly to consider carer assessment reports submitted.



The Department and CSOs will submit their carer assessment reports to the Panel Support Officer, along with any supporting information and the completed Panel checklist.

Assessment reports should be on the template provided by the Department, to allow for a consistent format. However, there will be a grace period (until November 2017) for using the assessment report template when the Panel first becomes operational.

The Panel has the following outcome options:

1. To **endorse** the proposed approval of a carer - the carer applicant meets each competency.
2. To **not endorse** the proposed approval of a carer - the carer assessment does not demonstrate the applicant's ability to meet the competencies.

Panel discussions on each carer assessment will be documented. Agencies will be informed of Panel recommendations within 24 hours of the Panel sitting and can advise carer applicants of the Panel's recommendation. Agencies will also be formally advised in writing within 7 days of the Panel's recommendations.

Agencies are to take Panel recommendations into account when deciding whether to approve or not approve a carer applicant, but carer applicants must be clear that the final decision is made by the Department or relevant CSO.

## Continuous improvement

The Panel will monitor and review on an ongoing basis, enabling regular feedback and learning opportunities for continuous improvement for the Panel, the Department and CSOs.

The Panel Chair will provide feedback to the Department or CSO and raise any concerns or issues identified where necessary. Feedback about good practice will also be provided.

## Quarterly Reports

The ongoing monitoring and review will form the basis of Quarterly Reports on the work of the Panel which will be submitted to an oversight committee.

## Evaluation of the Cross-sector Foster Carer Panel

The Department's Information, Research and Evaluation unit will evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the Panel after 12 months operation with CSO attendance, including:

- the quality of assessments and information submitted to the Panel;
- the quality of information submitted after Panel feedback has been provided;
- the degree of consistency between Panel recommendations and decisions by the Department or CSO;
- the length of time taken for the assessment to go through the Panel process; and
- any trends or issues identified across the sector.

The intent of the evaluation is to measure improvement of quality of carer assessment reports.



## Other initiatives to support consistency of carer assessments

Other initiatives to support greater consistency in the assessment and approval of carers include:

- information sessions for assessors from the Department and CSOs;
- a new assessment manual and forms, which will be used for Department carer assessments - CSOs can use these as a resource alongside agency specific resources; and
- an assessment template report to be used for all carer assessments.

For information about the reforms, please refer to the Reform page on the Department's website (<http://www.dcp.gov.au/ChildreninCare/Pages/OOHCreform.aspx>).

