Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

A Practice Toolkit Proposal

SVA SOCIAL VANTAGE ADVISORY

Executive Summary

Queensland's foster care sector is at a crossroads. Demand for safe and stable home-based care continues to rise, yet the number of approved foster carers is declining year on year. This growing shortage puts pressure on existing carers, increases reliance on residential care, and reduces placement stability for children and young people.

Social Vantage Advisory (SVA) partners with foster carer and government agencies to address this challenge head-on. Our approach combines retention-led recruitment with deep local knowledge, cultural safety and sector-specific expertise. We help you to not only attract carers, but keep them engaged, supported and effective for the long term.

Our Goal

The current out of home care (OOHC) environment presents both urgent challenges and significant opportunities for Queensland foster care agencies. The goal of a well-designed practice toolkit for foster care services is a more stable carer pool, reduced turnover and better outcomes for children in care. To achieve this, we will:

- deliver evidence-based strategies tailored to your region and community
- focus on and embed a culture of carer retention as the foundation of recruitment success
- design practical, child-centred solutions aligned with legislative and funding requirements.

The Challenge

There are established challenges within the sector that impact the way Queensland's foster care system functions and delivers stability and safety for children in OOHC. In particular:

- carer numbers are in decline, creating shortages in culturally matched placements and specialist care
- new carers are leaving within their first 12 months at alarming rates
- increased reliance on residential care is stretching resources and impacting outcomes.

The Opportunity

Recent shifts in the foster care landscape are opening up opportunities for innovation and localised, responsive strategy. As a result, community-led and culturally safe approaches are gaining momentum and demonstrating positive outcomes. Rather than relying on reactive recruitments efforts, a focus on retention-led recruitment is helping agencies reduce turnover, foster stability and build a stronger foundation for attracting new carers.

Now is the time for agencies to rethink their approach and move from reactive recruitment campaigns to sustainable, data-informed strategies that address both attraction and retention.

SVA's expertise enables your agency to act decisively, meet funding expectations, and create lasting impact.

Why retention-led recruitment matters

The recruitment and retention of foster carers is not just a workforce function; it is a child protection strategy. Every placement decision represents a critical moment in a child or young person's life. The carers we recruit and retain directly shape the safety, stability and wellbeing of children in OOHC.

Reactive recruitment has been treated as the primary solution to a shrinking carer workforce for far too long. As is the case in many jurisdictions globally, enquiries from potential carers across Queensland may remain steady, yet conversion rates are dropping, approvals are slowing, and more carers are exiting the system each year than entering it. Meanwhile, the complexity of children's needs is increasing, and the pool of experienced carers, particularly those most able to take on complex placements, is shrinking.

This means that retention should not be considered a secondary strategy as it is the most effective and strategic form of recruitment. Retaining skilled, committed carers in the system supports continuity for children, fosters word-of-mouth advocacy, and reduces reliance on costly, less suitable placement options such as residential care.

The Case for Retention-Led Recruitment

Retention-led recruitment enables a multitude of benefits, supporting OOHC organisations to protect and support children:

1. **Children need stable, trusted relationships**
   Evidence shows that stable placements with supported carers are linked to better outcomes in education, mental health, identity development and wellbeing. High turnover disrupts attachments, increases trauma and undermines placement stability.

2. **Retention is more cost-effective than recruitment**
   Recruiting, assessing, training and approving a new carer takes months and thousands of dollars. Preventing a single carer from leaving can offset the need to recruit multiple new ones.

3. **Experience is irreplaceable**
   Carers with three or more years' experience are more likely to take sibling groups, teenagers and children with complex needs which is exactly where placement demand is highest. Losing them increases pressure on residential care and reduces placement matching options.

4. **Retention drives diversity and inclusion**
   Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers, culturally and linguistically diverse carers, and LGBTQIA+ carers may face additional barriers. Retaining these carers strengthens cultural safety and identity-affirming care for children.
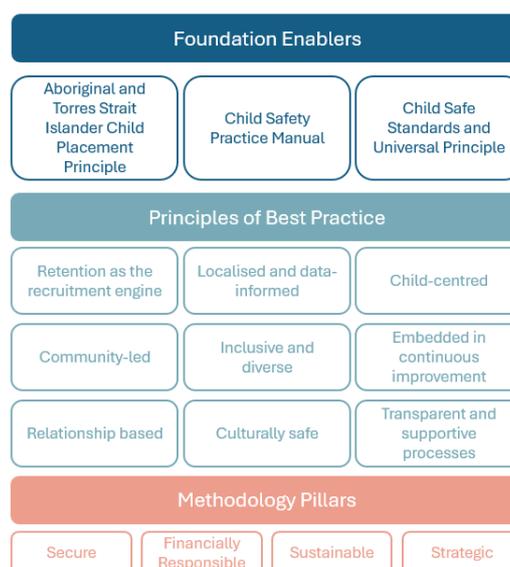
5. **Carers recruit carers**
   Word-of-mouth is consistently one of the most trusted recruitment channels. Supported carers become advocates; unsupported carers become exit interviews and deterrents.

Our Service Delivery Model

To support positive outcomes for organisations, carers, children and young people and the community, our delivery model is aligned with the Child Safety Practice Manual, the National Child Safe Standards and Universal Principle and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. These provide the foundation for our four methodology pillars for supporting successful carer retention and recruitment and are enabled by our principles of best practice.

Principles of Best Practice

When carers feel valued, supported and included, they stay and bring others with them. Building a system that prioritises retention first is the most child-centred, cost-effective and sustainable recruitment strategy available. Retention-led recruitment works when the following principles are embedded in everyday practice:

Foundation Enablers

| Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle | Child Safety Practice Manual | Child Safe Standards and Universal Principle |

Principles of Best Practice

Retention as the recruitment engine	Localised and data-informed	Child-centred
Community-led	Inclusive and diverse	Embedded in continuous improvement
Relationship based	Culturally safe	Transparent and supportive processes

Methodology Pillars

| Secure | Financially Responsible | Sustainable | Strategic |

Child-centred and relationship-based

- Recruitment focuses on meeting the needs of children and young people, not simply increasing carer numbers.
- Carer matching takes children's voices and preferences into consideration wherever possible, consistent with the Child Safe Standards.
- Relationships of trust and stability are prioritised over short-term capacity gains.

Retention as the recruitment engine

- Support, inclusion in decision-making and timely responses keep carers engaged.
- Ongoing feedback, surveys and exit interviews identify and address risks early.

Culturally safe and community-led

- Practice reflects the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle*.
- First Nations communities lead recruitment and training where possible, supported by cultural mentors, Elders and ATSICCOs.

Inclusive and diverse

- Services actively recruit and retain carers from a wide range of cultural, linguistic, faith, family and identity backgrounds.
- Assessment focuses on capacity and connection, not conformity.

Localised and data-informed

- Strategies are grounded in local OOHC profiles, turnover trends and placement needs.
- Tools such as Gaps Analysis and Carer Capability Framework guide evidence-based decision-making.

Transparent and supportive processes

- Carers receive realistic information early about the challenges and rewards of fostering.
- Clear, timely and compassionate processes are maintained from first enquiry to ongoing support.

Embedded in continuous improvement

- Services monitor KPIs such as approval timelines, placement stability and satisfaction.
- Innovation is encouraged and good practice is shared across the sector.

What Retention-Led Recruitment Looks Like in Practice

Retention-led recruitment changes the focus from "How many carers did we approve this year?" to "How many carers are still active, capable and thriving?"

It means:

- Actively listening to carers through feedback, surveys and one-on-one conversations.
- Providing extra support during high-risk moments such as allegations, placement breakdowns or transitions.
- Building peer networks and local carer communities for connection and resilience.
- Recognising and celebrating carers year-round, not just during formal events.
- Offering clear development pathways, training, and mentorship for carers to grow in capability.
- Embedding cultural safety and identity into every engagement with carers and children.

Toolkit teaser

As part of our engagement, your organisation will gain access to a suite of tailored tools designed to strengthen foster carer recruitment and retention. These tools are not off-the-shelf, they are developed in close collaboration with your team to reflect your local context, community needs, and strategic priorities.

The toolkit is built around the principle that retention is the most effective form of recruitment. It draws on best practice, sector insights, and lived experience to offer practical, actionable resources that support carer wellbeing, cultural safety, and placement stability.
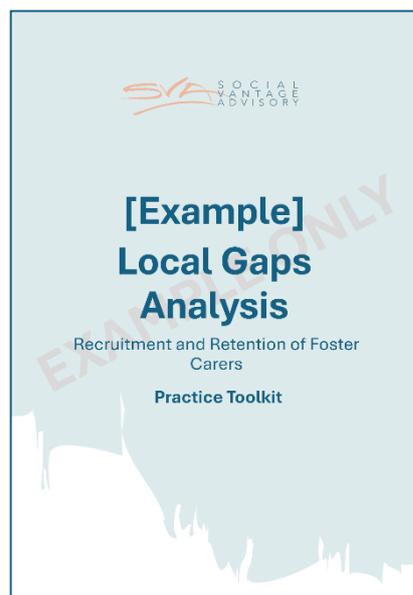
These tools are designed to be flexible, scalable, and responsive, regardless of your size or location.

The full toolkit is available exclusively through our consultancy engagement, so that each component is applied effectively and adapted to your operational environment. We work alongside your team to embed these tools into practice, build internal capability, and deliver measurable outcomes.

While each toolkit is unique, it may include elements such as:

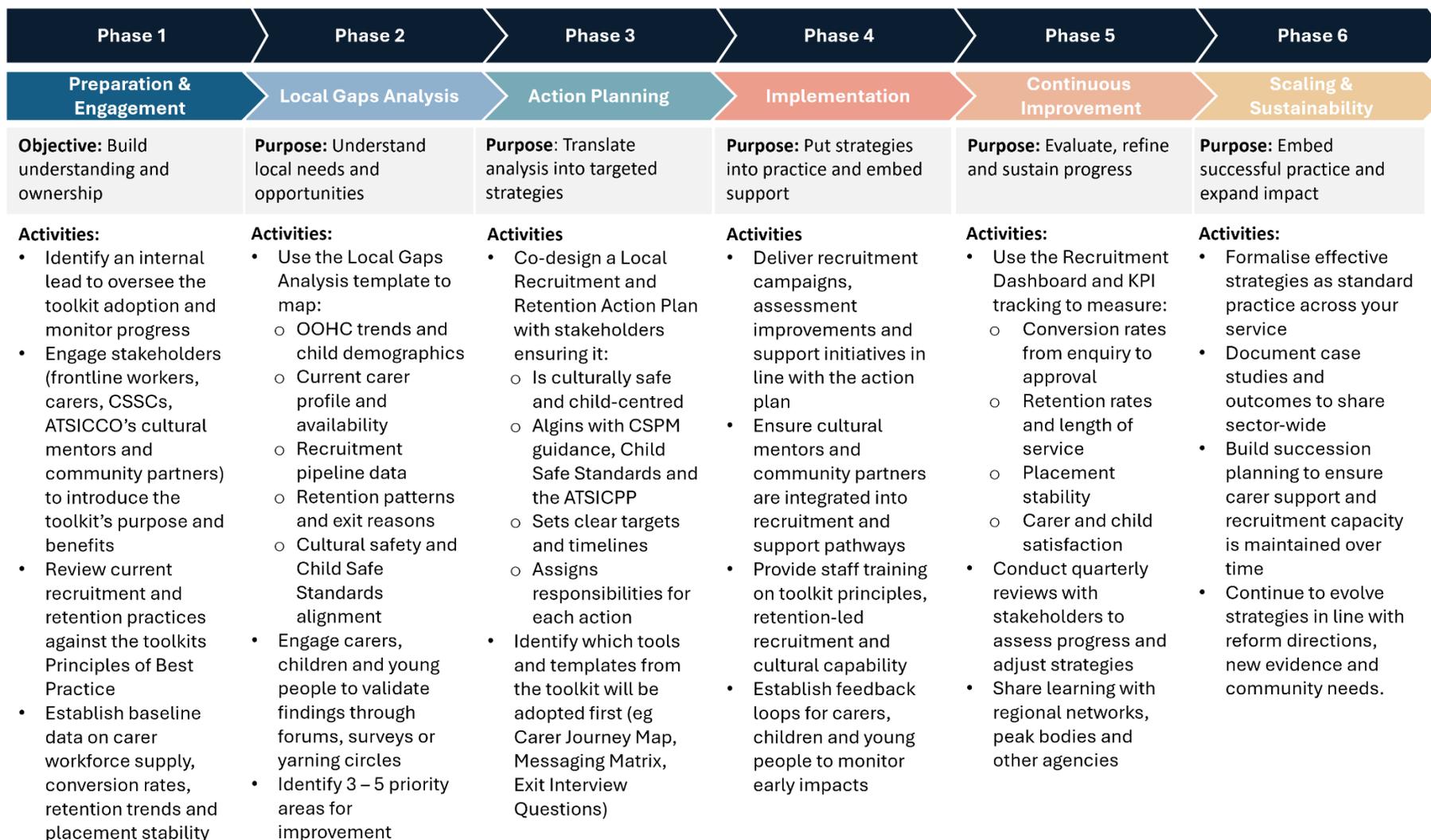- **Local Gaps Analysis** to identify placement trends, carer availability, and unmet needs
- **Carer Capability Mapping** to align carer skills and preferences with placement demands
- **Feedback and Exit Interview Templates** to capture carer voice and inform continuous improvement

An example Local Gaps Analysis is included in Appendix A to provide a glimpse into how data-driven insights can inform your strategy.

Our Process

We make the process straightforward, collaborative, and flexible to your needs. While every engagement is unique, most projects follow a clear sequence. This approach means that strategies aren't just designed but embedded in your operations and adapted to your changing needs.

| Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6
Preparation & Engagement	**Local Gaps Analysis**	**Action Planning**	**Implementation**	**Continuous Improvement**	**Scaling & Sustainability**
Objective: Build understanding and ownership	**Purpose:** Understand local needs and opportunities	**Purpose**: Translate analysis into targeted strategies	**Purpose:** Put strategies into practice and embed support	**Purpose:** Evaluate, refine and sustain progress	**Purpose:** Embed successful practice and expand impact

Activities:
• Identify an internal lead to oversee the toolkit adoption and monitor progress
• Engage stakeholders (frontline workers, carers, CSSCs, ATSICCO's cultural mentors and community partners) to introduce the toolkit's purpose and benefits
• Review current recruitment and retention practices against the toolkits Principles of Best Practice
• Establish baseline data on carer workforce supply, conversion rates, retention trends and placement stability
	Activities:
	• Use the Local Gaps Analysis template to map:
	  o OOHC trends and child demographics
	  o Current carer profile and availability
	  o Recruitment pipeline data
	  o Retention patterns and exit reasons
	  o Cultural safety and Child Safe Standards alignment
	• Engage carers, children and young people to validate findings through forums, surveys or yarning circles
	• Identify 3 – 5 priority areas for improvement
		Activities
		• Co-design a Local Recruitment and Retention Action Plan with stakeholders ensuring it:
		  o Is culturally safe and child-centred
		  o Algins with CSPM guidance, Child Safe Standards and the ATSICPP
		  o Sets clear targets and timelines
		  o Assigns responsibilities for each action
		• Identify which tools and templates from the toolkit will be adopted first (eg Carer Journey Map, Messaging Matrix, Exit Interview Questions)
			Activities
			• Deliver recruitment campaigns, assessment improvements and support initiatives in line with the action plan
			• Ensure cultural mentors and community partners are integrated into recruitment and support pathways
			• Provide staff training on toolkit principles, retention-led recruitment and cultural capability
			• Establish feedback loops for carers, children and young people to monitor early impacts
				Activities:
				• Use the Recruitment Dashboard and KPI tracking to measure:
				  o Conversion rates from enquiry to approval
				  o Retention rates and length of service
				  o Placement stability
				  o Carer and child satisfaction
				• Conduct quarterly reviews with stakeholders to assess progress and adjust strategies
				• Share learning with regional networks, peak bodies and other agencies
					Activities:
					• Formalise effective strategies as standard practice across your service
					• Document case studies and outcomes to share sector-wide
					• Build succession planning to ensure carer support and recruitment capacity is maintained over time
					• Continue to evolve strategies in line with reform directions, new evidence and community needs.

The future of foster care in Queensland depends on the strength and stability of the carer workforce. With the right strategy, your organisation can not only recruit more carers but keep them engaged for years to come.

SVA is ready to help you:

- Build a stable and diverse carer base
- Reduce churn and strengthen retention
- Attract culturally matched carers for your community
- Deliver measurable improvements in placement stability and child outcomes

Let's start the conversation.
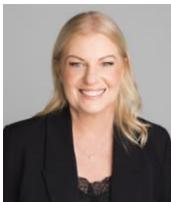
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Appendix A: Example Local Gaps Analysis

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[Example] Local Gaps Analysis

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

Practice Toolkit

EXAMPLE ONLY

Strategic Aim

The aim of this analysis is to identify gaps in foster care recruitment and retention to inform targeted strategies that ensure safe, culturally responsive, and stable placements for children and young people in OOHC.

It aligns with our commitment to child safety, cultural safety, and carer wellbeing by prioritising trauma-informed, inclusive practices and supporting carers through every stage of their journey.

Outcomes will support continuous improvement through data-driven planning, feedback loops, and collaborative practice with care teams.

This work will inform regional OOHC strategies and strengthen partnerships.

Children in Out-Of-Home-Care (OOHC)

All data provided below is just an example and is not accurate.

Example Number of children in care
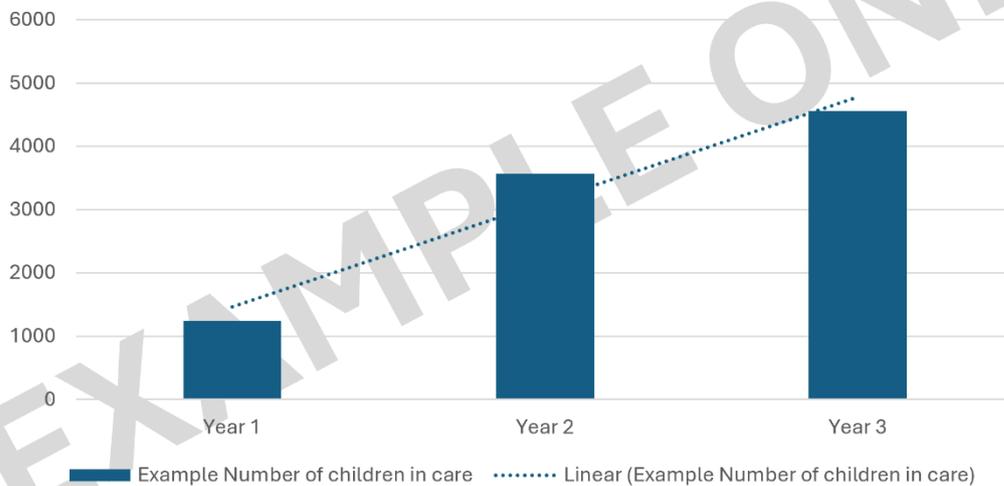
Example Placement Types
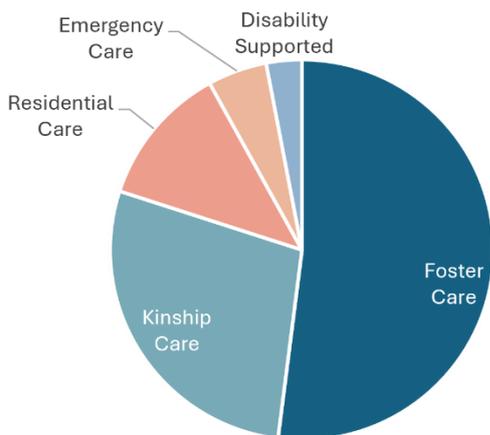
Example Current Placement Number

APPENDIX A: Example Local Gaps Analysis
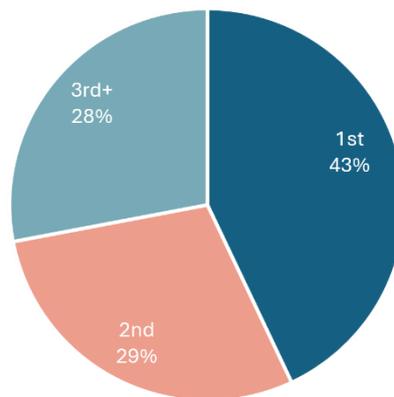
Children in Out-Of-Home-Care (OOHC) – Cont.

Example Demographics
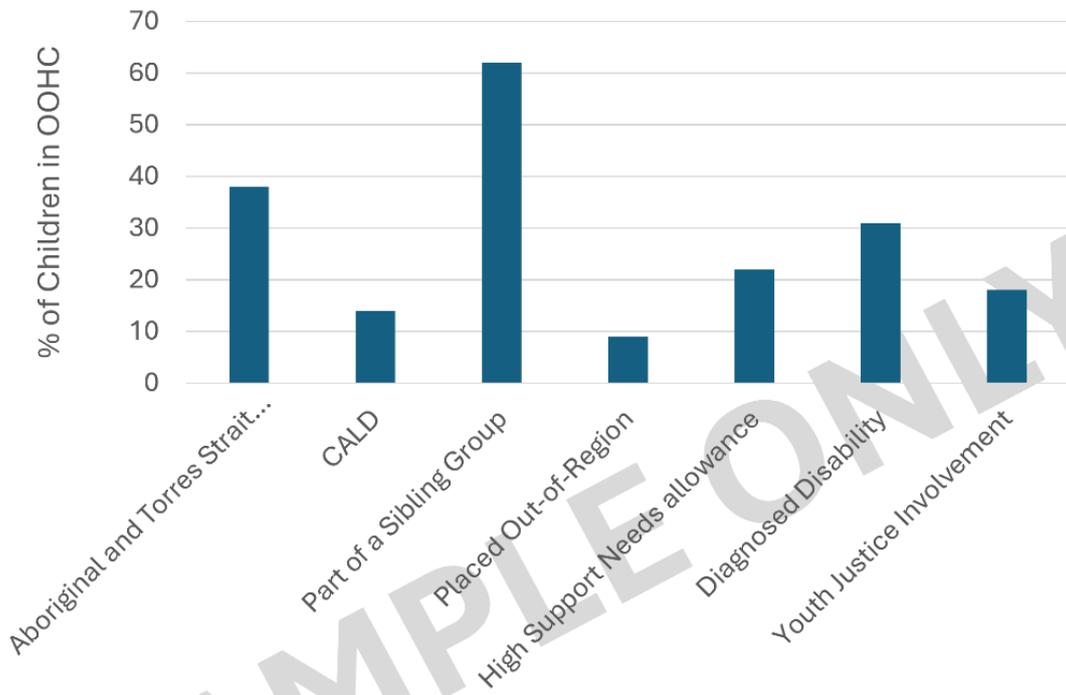
Foster Carer Profile

176
Approved Foster Care Households

287
Active Foster Cares

352
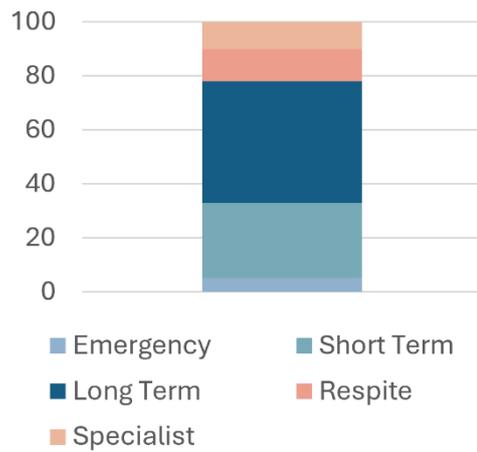Approved Foster Care Individuals

65
Inactive Foster Cares

APPENDIX A: Example Local Gaps Analysis

Foster Care Profile – Cont.

Example Carer Demographics

Legend: ■ Female ■ Male ■ Undisclosed
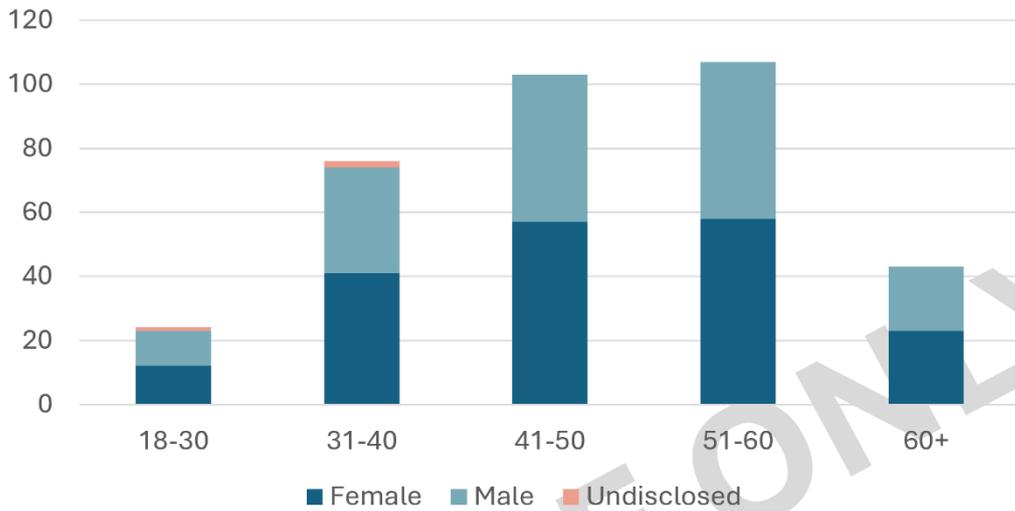
Example Languages Spoken by Carers

Categories: Language 1, Language 2, Language 3, Language 4, Language 5

Type of Placement

Legend: ■ Emergency ■ Short Term ■ Long Term ■ Respite ■ Specialist

Years of Experience

Legend: ■ <1 ■ 1 to 2 ■ 2 to 3 ■ 3 to 5 ■ 5 to 7 ■ 7+

Faith of Carers

Categories: Faith 1, Faith 2, Faith 3, Faith 4

APPENDIX A: Example Local Gaps Analysis
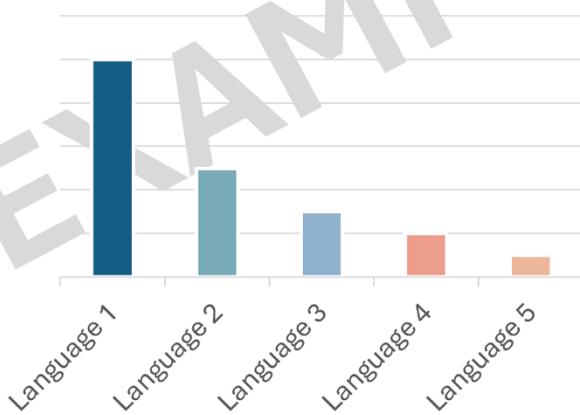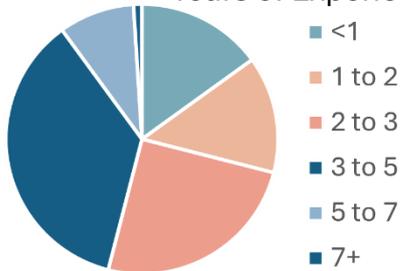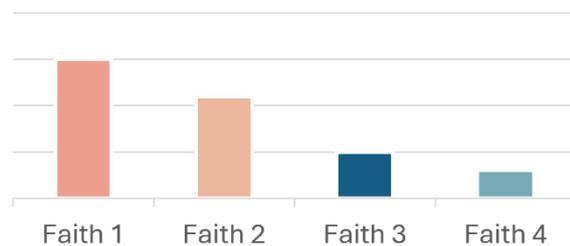
Foster Care Profile – Cont.

Training Completion Numbers
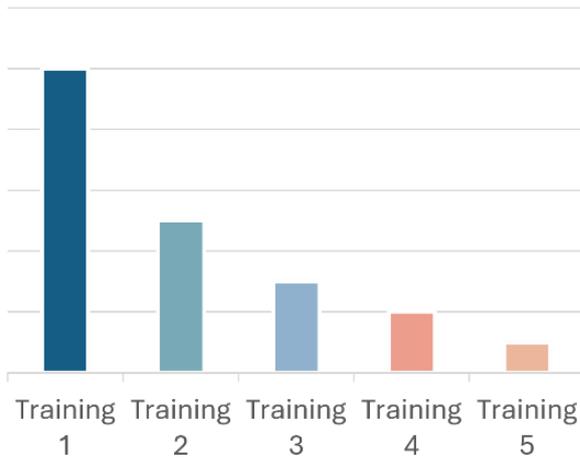
Placement Availability

- Vacant Placement
- Occupied Placements
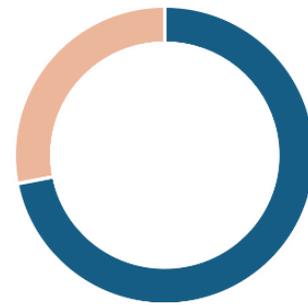
Recruitment Pipeline & Process Analysis

564 Foster Care Inquiries

87% Approval Rate

**35 days** Average time from inquiry to result

13% Drop-out Rate

Detailed text paragraph that analyses the total eqnuries received compared to the approved carer numbers to identify a conversion rate and how this has compared over time with different recruitment strategies. Further detail will elaborate on the drop-out rate and the reasons identified as to why potential carers are not approved or remove themselves from the approval process. Analysis of the applicant experience based on feedback, including the average time taken from first contact to approval. Elaboration on the suitability and cultural responsiveness of current marketing materials and the alignment between applicant profiles and the needs of children and young people will be analyse with further data.

APPENDIX A: Example Local Gaps Analysis

Retention and Exit Analysis
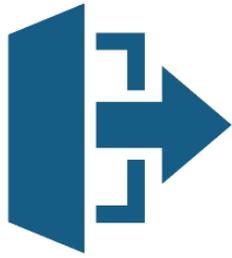
14%
Of Foster Carers Leave Annually

Paragraph detailing the reasons for this and trends over time including the age of carers leaving, the type of placements they had, how long they had stayed for, the training they completed, and reasons identified in their exit interviews that can indicate potential exit trends.

Specific attention will be given to the reasons for existing, such as dissatisfaction, burnout, retirement, allegations of abuse or harm, lack of placements etc.

Details about the level of support and the impact of support services on retention will be analysed. Similarly, a detailed analysis of feedback from exit interviews and/or complaints will be undertaken to help determine the level of support received by carers during standards of care/harm allegations to help identify is this is a contributing factor to the exit rate.

Experience at Exit

■ <1 year ■ 1-2 years ■ 2 - 5 years ■ 5+ years

Type of Placement Upon Exit

Emergency Short Term Long Term Respite Specialist
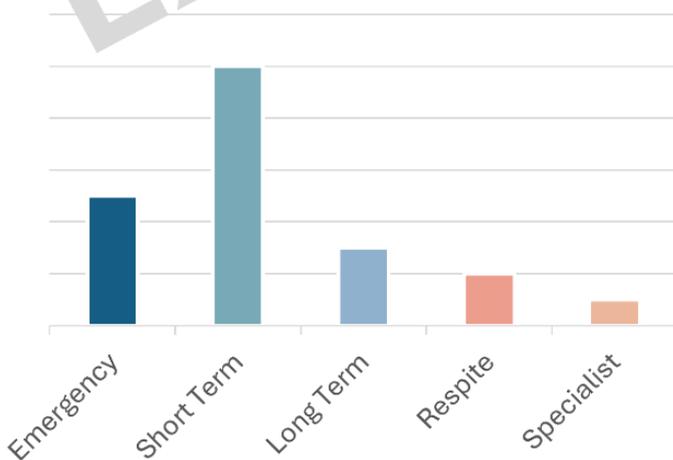
Additional areas that will be analysed include the perceived value and inclusion of carers in the system as well as the number, accessibility and type of opportunities that carers, children, young people and families have to participate in the development of recruitment, retention and support strategies. Additionally, a focus will be placed on analysing how the feedback from carers, children, young people and families is captured, respected and acted on.

APPENDIX A: Example Local Gaps Analysis

Child Safe Standards & Cultural Responsiveness

Key questions that will be asked and analysed may include:

- To what extent are Child Safe Standards reflected in recruitment and support processes?
  - Standard 5: Are carers screened and supported in line with the standard?
  - Standard 7: Are carers equipped with necessary knowledge and skills through ongoing education and training in line with the standard?
  - Standard 9: Is carer feedback used for ongoing service improvement?
- How well are the cultural rights and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people understood and met by your carer pool?
- Are carers included in case planning and care team processes in ways that promote shared decision-making and partnership, as outlined in the CSPM?
- How is placement matching undertaken?
  - How are the voices of children and young people considered in carer matching and placement decisions?
  - Are there mechanisms for children and young people to express preferences or provide feedback on their care experience?
- What role do ATSICCOs or cultural mentors play in carer assessment, training and matching?
- Are First Nations carers supported to apply, be approved and remain engaged?

Gaps Identification

Key questions that will be asked and analysed may include:

- Do you have sufficient foster carers in your region to meet current and projected need?
- Are carers appropriately matched to:
  - Age groups
  - High support needs
  - Cultural backgrounds
  - Placement types (eg emergency v long-term)
- Are there geographic mismatches between where carers are located and where children and young people need placements?
- Are there unmet needs for:
  - Sibling group placements
  - Placements for teens or children with complexity of needs
  - Single-child placements
  - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander placements
- Is your carer pool reflective of the diversity of your OOHC population?

APPENDIX A: Example Local Gaps Analysis

Strategic Priorities

1 **Priority 1:**
Further detail elaborating this priority, why it is important and what actions should be taken to achieve it.

2 **Priority 2:**
Further detail elaborating this priority, why it is important and what actions should be taken to achieve it.

3 **Priority 3:**
Further detail elaborating this priority, why it is important and what actions should be taken to achieve it.

4 **Priority 4:**
Further detail elaborating this priority, why it is important and what actions should be taken to achieve it.

5 **Priority 5:**
Further detail elaborating this priority, why it is important and what actions should be taken to achieve it.

Changes Necessary for Improvement:

Carer Recruitment Targeting:
- Change 1 detail
- Change 2 detail

Cultural Safety in Carer Engagement:
- Change 1 detail
- Change 2 detail

Assessment & Onboarding Process:
- Change 1 detail
- Change 2 detail

Ongoing Support & Supervision:
- Change 1 detail
- Change 2 detail

Overall summary of suggested measures to elevate success and support continuous improvement moving forward, including actionable items and an implementation and monitoring plan if requested.

APPENDIX A: Example Local Gaps Analysis