

Carers' snapshot 2017



ACT
Government
Community Services

ACTtogether
Every child matters

Working together

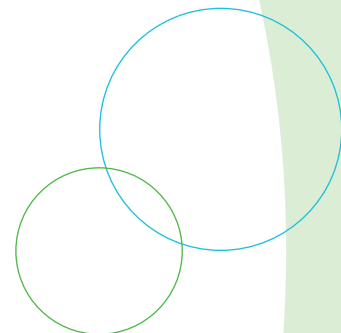


This year marks the second year of services delivered by ACT Together, Uniting and Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS) as part of *A Step Up for Our Kids*. During these last two years, with your help, we have achieved a great deal together in support of children and young people. We are seeing greater stability in placements for children in care, and an increasing number of applications for permanency assessments. We have recruited over 50 new carers and are starting to see new support and networking groups taking shape.

Our advocacy and engagement services – Carers ACT, Birth Family Advocacy Support Service and CREATE – have been active in offering support, training and information services. These services play an important role in making sure we consider the views and needs of everyone in the out of home care system and help to improve the way we work together for the benefit of the children and young people in our care.

The changes we have made to our systems and services are still fresh, and we have been working through issues as they arise to improve our processes and ensure your experience as a carer is one where you feel supported, heard and valued. Next year you can expect to have more opportunities to provide input into what we can do better, by letting us know about what you need and what is working best for you.

We thank you for providing loving, safe and nurturing homes for children who need our support the most, and we look forward to working with you again in 2018.



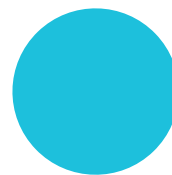
Mark Collis

Executive Director
Children, Youth and Families
ACT Government
Community Services

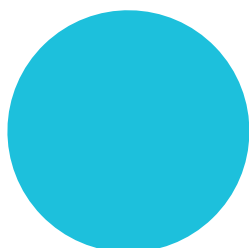


Deirdre Cheers

Chief Executive Officer
Barnardos Australia



December 2017



Facts and figures

64 new foster carers joined the team. ACT Together is **80%** of the way towards achieving the goal of 80 new carers.

As at June 2017, we had **412** kinship carers creating **262** kinship care households.

804 children and young people were in out of home care as at October 2017.

78% of children and young people leaving care in 2016-17 experienced no more than two care placements.

As at June 2017, we had **574** foster carers creating **338** foster care households.

48 people completed part 1 and 2 of the trauma-informed care training from May to August 2017.

64 foster and kinship carers received help through **advocacy**.

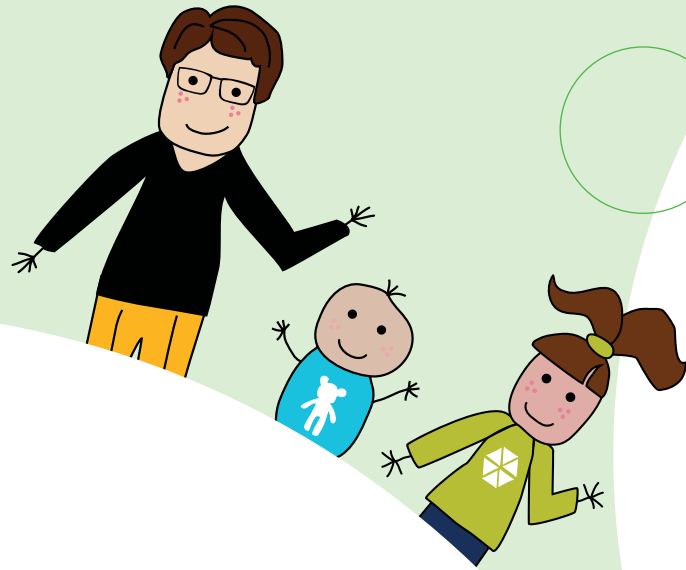
7 carer recruitment training sessions were held in 2016-17.

248 therapeutic assessments have been completed.

As at September 2017, **169** families received support from Uniting as part of its Children and Families program. **57** of these families identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families.

What carers asked advocacy services for help with:

- incidents that happen outside the home
- Enduring Parental Responsibility orders and the adoption process
- transfer of interstate kinship carers and support
- medical and therapeutic treatment costs
- National Disability Insurance Scheme
- financial supports
- respite supports
- communication



First time carer – welcome to the family

Rebecca's story

From a young age, Rebecca always expected she would become a foster carer at some point in her life. An early friendship with a child in foster care had introduced her to the idea.

The idea of becoming a foster carer remained with her into adulthood, and in 2017 Rebecca decided it was time and so she began the process of becoming a foster carer with ACT Together.

'The time was right for me to be able to provide the care, consistency and love to assist a child to grow', she said.

Rebecca initially thought she might dip her toe in, offering respite care. However, after learning more about the system Rebecca decided she could offer concurrency care.

While concurrency care is not something all states and territories do in Australia, it is the ideal model of care for children in the ACT. In practice, it means carers supporting restoration while also being committed to caring for a child permanently if restoration is not successful.

Rebecca undertook the revised Initial Carer Training earlier this year, and found it provided her with invaluable knowledge about the effects of trauma and good insight into birth families and how to engage with them.

'I really enjoyed the process of becoming a carer – the training prepared me for placement and gave me opportunities to connect with staff, carers and other applicants. It gave me a better understanding of the need for foster carers and the types of care required.'

Rebecca had her first placement in September. She said, 'Fostering has been a wonderful life changing experience that has enriched not only my life but also my family'.

'The time was right for me to be able to provide the care, consistency and love to assist a child to grow.'

Carer recruitment

Without carers, many children and young people in our community would not have safe and nurturing homes, making the job of carers an extremely important one. Kinship carers can be easier to find because of the family connection that already exists, but it is not always possible to place a child in need with another family member. This is why it is so important to encourage other members of our community to open up their homes, and hearts, and become foster carers.

ACT Together is responsible for the recruitment, assessment and training of those who apply to become a foster carer. Recruitment activities are organised throughout the year through community events, social media and radio. People interested are encouraged to seek more information from the ACT Together website or by contacting the enquiry line, 1300 WE FOSTER.

ACT Together also holds fortnightly information sessions where potential carers learn about what it means to be a carer, what the application process is, and to receive answers to any questions they may have. Application packs are provided at this time.

Fast facts:

- 288 individuals attended information sessions from January to November 2017.
- 42 applications were received between June and November 2017.
- 91 applicants completed the foster care training program, this year.
- 64 applicants were endorsed by the Carer Assessment and Linking Panel.
- 80 per cent of the endorsed applicants have since had placement offers.



A Step Up for Our Kids

The ACT Government's five-year strategy – *A Step Up for Our Kids* – aims to improve the lives of children and young people in care by providing more flexible, child-focused services. The goal is to prevent children from entering care, or if they cannot remain with their birth family, then moving them into stable alternate family settings as quickly as possible. The last two years of *A Step Up for Our Kids* have been focused on setting up new services, transitioning case management to ACT Together and smoothing out processes and systems. This was a big undertaking, the likes of which had not been seen in the ACT before.

The focus of *A Step Up for Our Kids* now is to change gears and start to improve our performance – this includes reducing red tape, making it easier for carers to find out information and simplifying processes where possible. We are constantly reviewing our services and monitoring performance through compliance audits, evaluation data, our governance framework and your feedback.

We are on track to welcoming 80 new foster carers by 2018.

Making a difference on multiple levels



Gönna's story

The gift of caring comes in many ways when it comes to long-time carer, Gönna. With personal experience as both a kinship and foster carer, Gönna also gives her time to carer working groups, art projects and assessment panels.

Gönna is the energy behind a committed group of quilters who have made around 100 quilts for infants under the care of ACT Together. For these quilters, it is not just about creating a blanket to keep a child warm, but also the creation of a safety and transition object for children in out of home care. The gift of these quilts is a tangible expression of the care our community has for our most vulnerable children.

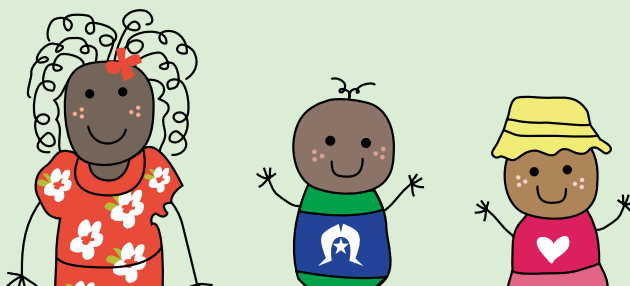
Gönna is also active in a more operational, system sense. She is a regular member of the Carer Assessment and Linking Panel (CALP) that advises on the suitability of future carers. 'I enjoy sitting on CALP because it gives me an opportunity to support the system in choosing good carers. My personal experience as a kin and foster carer, as well as my strong interest in trauma education, enable me to bring a certain perspective to the panel that has often deepened our discussion and highlighted certain strengths or vulnerabilities of carers.'

Not satisfied with just one way to contribute more broadly to the out of home care system, this year Gönna also became a member of the newly formed Carer Wellbeing Sub-Committee, where she is a strong advocate for ensuring work is done to support carers. 'I chose to get involved in the Carer Wellbeing group because I wanted to make sure the voices of carers were heard at the management level', she said.

In many ways, Gönna is making a difference bringing her personal experience and gift of caring to support the out of home care system, its carers and the children they open their homes to.



'...I chose to get involved ... because I wanted to make sure the voices of carers were heard...'



Making sure the needs of carers are taken into account in the overall management of our out of home care system.



Carer Wellbeing Sub-Committee

The Carer Wellbeing Sub-Committee is made up of carers with a variety of caring experiences and members of Carers ACT, ACT Together and CYPS. This sub-committee was set up this year as part of the governance structure of *A Step Up for Our Kids* to make sure the needs of carers are taken into account in the overall management of our out of home care system. The sub-committee is developing a work plan that will focus on:

- improving the support, communication and information provided to carers
- surveying carers to find out what is and is not working
- building a culture that supports the carer relationship.

This sub-committee provides advice and recommendations to the *A Step Up for Our Kids* Joint Governance Group on the carer experience and priorities for actions that will place carers at the heart of the system.

Carer advocacy service and the ACT Carers Strategy

The Foster and Kinship Carer Advocacy Service operated by Carers ACT, provides advocacy supports for foster and kinship carers to empower and support them in navigating the out of home care system. The service liaises with internal and external stakeholders, service providers and others to meet carer needs. It also identifies systemic issues for advocacy action. In 2017, 64 carers received assistance and were linked with the support and information they needed.

Also in 2017, Carers ACT in partnership with the ACT Government ran a consultative process with carers as part of the development of the ACT Carers Strategy. Carers were encouraged to participate to provide their voices, thoughts and wisdom to identify how Canberra could become a carer friendly community. In December, the ACT Carers Strategy was released along with a ten-year commitment by the Government endorsing the vision, outcomes and priorities. Work now begins on developing a three-year action plan for implementation in 2018. The Strategy provides a foundation for the community to work towards the goal of acknowledging and supporting all carers within our community. It also complements the work of the Carer Wellbeing Sub-Committee.

First same-sex adoption in the ACT from foster care

Dale and Jamie's story

In May 2017, foster carers Dale and Jamie were over the moon to become the first same-sex couple to legally adopt in the ACT from foster care.

Their journey to adoption began many years ago when the couple decided to apply to be foster carers after several years of considering their parenting possibilities. In October 2012, their application was successful and so started the expansion of their family.

In November 2012, Dale and Jamie opened their home to their first foster child – 11-month old, Malachy. The couple describe the support they received from the get-go as very reassuring and convenient with 24-hour access to a support line. The regular visits from support workers they described as ‘a cup of tea and time to talk about your children – it’s great, who doesn’t like talking about their children!’. As with all families, there have been ups and downs over the five years since Dale and Jamie began fostering, but in their words it’s really been mostly ‘ups’.

Since their first placement, Dale and Jamie have cared for five children – two emergency, short-term placements, and three long-term placements – and on 17 May 2017, following a Supreme Court hearing, Malachy was adopted permanently by Dale and Jamie and removed from the fostering system.

Malachy called the day ‘Judge Day’ and was very eager for it to come, counting down the number of sleeps until it would arrive. Jamie had made chocolate brownies to help celebrate the day, two of which Malachy asked for on the morning of Judge Day. Malachy explained he needed two brownies because he was going to give one to the Judge and he was going to eat the other one – with the Judge!

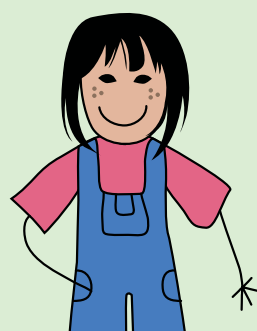
Dale and Jamie recall the official signing of the adoption papers was very quick, and that five-year old Malachy was dwarfed by Judge Mossop’s six foot, five inch frame. There was time for a few pleasantries, brownie-eating and some quick photos.

Dale and Jamie are very thankful to Barnardos, ACT Together and officers within CYPS in assisting them along the way towards Malachy’s adoption.

Several months later, The Canberra Times ran a front-page article on the adoption. The article now sits proudly, framed, in the family’s dining room, and any visitor to the home is quickly directed to it by a very happy Malachy.



‘...it’s great, who doesn’t like talking about their children!’



Helping you to navigate the care system

With changes to the care system over the past two years from the implementation of the out of home care strategy, *A Step Up for Our Kids*, it can be confusing to know who to contact.

Both CYPS and ACT Together provide case management for children in care and interact with carers and members of the community to ensure the safety and wellbeing of these children.

CYPS is responsible for the case management of children who are on interim or short-term care orders.

ACT Together is responsible for the case management of children who are on long-term orders.

If you have a question regarding any aspect of your kinship or foster child's care, your case manager should be your first point of call.

During your involvement with CYPS or ACT Together, you have the right to express your views about the services and decisions we provide concerning the child in your care, whether this is positive or constructive feedback, a complaint or a request to have a decision reviewed. For any of these reasons, your case manager should again be your first point of call. As a carer, you can also contact:

For CYPS:

CYPS Complaints Unit
P: 6207 5294
E: ocyfs@act.gov.au

For ACT Together:

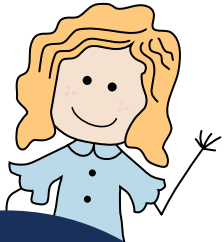
Carer Support
P: 6110 2200
E: carersupport@acttogether.org.au

Carers ACT:

Kinship and Foster
Carers Advocacy
P: 0447 632 067
E: kinshipfostercare@carersact.org.au

Depending on your unique situation, there can be times that are stressful, difficult or confronting. It is important that at all times everyone involved puts the best interests of children first. When making decisions about a child CYPS and ACT Together will always use the best interests principle.

To further support you in your carer role, you also have access to a Carer Liaison Officer in CYPS, a Carer Support team in ACT Together, and you can contact Carers ACT at any time. These roles can support you to access information and advocate on your behalf. They also work to strengthen relationships between carers, CYPS and ACT Together.



As a carer, you have access to carer support when you need it.

Planning for better outcomes

One of the initiatives of *A Step Up for Our Kids* is the completion of therapeutic assessments and plans for all children and young people entering care. A therapeutic assessment looks at the impact of trauma on a child's development and what supports would be of most benefit to them. At the beginning of November this year, 248 assessments had been completed with another 33 in progress.

Who are assessments for?

Therapeutic assessments and plans focus on helping to meet the needs of children and young people, but are also invaluable for carers. Carers are an important part of the development of the Therapeutic Case Plan. The plan also helps to identify how you can be supported to best meet the needs of the child or young person entering your care.

The aim of the assessments are to provide an overall view of the child or young person's needs across multiple areas, such as the impact of trauma on their development, to ensure any related difficulties are identified and treated as early as possible.

A therapeutic assessor will conduct the initial assessment with you very soon after a child or young person first enters care to ensure you have information about the child's needs as soon as possible.

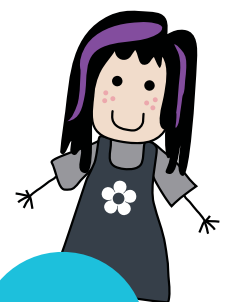
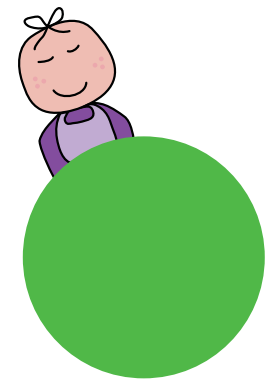
What information will carers receive as part of the initial assessment?

The initial assessment will give you a greater understanding of the child or young person's history and trauma they have experienced so you have a better understanding of their situation. You will receive information about:

- why the child or young person entered the care system and an overview of the trauma they experienced – for example, neglect or exposure to family violence
- what to look out for in the child or young person's behaviour and social and emotional presentation
- strategies that may help to settle the child or young person into your care
- the full therapeutic assessment process and when you can expect it to commence for the child or young person in your care.

What is the difference between the initial assessment and the full therapeutic assessment?

The initial assessment provides an immediate understanding of a child or young person's situation. Carers receive information to support the child's transition to care in the early stages. The full therapeutic assessment is a more detailed assessment that looks at the different areas of a child or young person's life – health and development, emotional and





Therapeutic assessments and plans focus on improving outcomes for children and young people.

behavioural development, education and learning, family and social relationships, self-help skills, culture and identity, and indicators of trauma in the child or young person.

The assessment process is designed to reduce the need for many different appointments with people the child does not know. The assessor will gather information from others who already know, or who have already assessed the child or young person. Information gathering can include the use of questionnaires for a carer, birth parent or teacher, interviews with caregivers or follow-up observations of the child or young person.

How can carers use the information from the therapeutic assessment?

As part of the assessment process a therapeutic assessor will contact you to organise a time to meet and talk about the child or young person in your care. You may be asked to complete a questionnaire which helps with the assessment. This meeting is an opportunity for the assessor to share information with you about trauma, attachment and child and adolescent development.

After the assessment, you will receive recommendations to support you to provide a therapeutic environment for the child or young person and to support their development. As the carer, you are the child or young person's most important resource in terms of healing and recovery from the trauma they have experienced.

Once the assessment has been completed, you will be invited to a therapeutic care team meeting and receive a copy of the Therapeutic Assessment Report so the recommendations can be discussed and prioritised. These discussions will help with goal development and will support future case planning. Case workers from ACT Together and CYPS as well as other professionals involved with the child or young person's care and possibly their birth parents, may also attend the meeting.

What happens after the therapeutic care team meeting?

The care team meeting signals the end of the therapeutic assessment and the assessor's involvement with the child or young person. Ongoing planning and decision making about the child or young person's care becomes the responsibility of the care teams in partnership with ACT Together or CYPS.

Here to help

If you have any questions about the therapeutic assessment process or want to discuss any other matters relating to a child or young person in your care, please contact your ACT Together or CYPS case worker – we want to make your job easier and are here to help you. For ACT Together, call 6110 2200. For CYPS, call 6207 1069 (North) or 6207 1466 (South).



A Step Up for Our Kids: Out of Home Care Strategy 2015-2020 is an ACT Government funded initiative.

- ACT Together is a consortium of:
- Barnardos Australia
 - Australian Childhood Foundation
 - Oz Child
 - Premier Youthworks
 - Relationships Australia

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**From us to you,
we say thank you.**