

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

Report

Pathways to caring: strategic engagement of potential foster carers

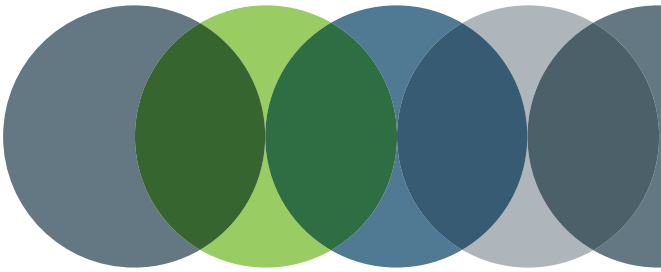
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About the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre and its members share social responsibility with government and the broader community for addressing disadvantage and eliminating vulnerability in Victoria. As the peak body for child and family welfare, we provide independent analysis, dialogue and cross-sectoral engagement to break down multi-causal factors that perpetuate vulnerability. With our members, our role is to build capacity and capability through training, research, evidence and innovation to influence change.

Foreword

Foster care is vital for children and young people who cannot live with their own families. The need for foster care placement options is a vital element in the out-of-home care response to children under the care of the State of Victoria. While kinship care placements have increased proportionately, the absolute number of placements required from foster carers has remained steady. Foster care plays an increasing role in emergency care and is increasingly sought for children with complex needs. The need to attract and maintain a pool of experienced, well-trained foster carers is critical.

Ensuring that there are sufficient numbers of appropriately skilled and supported foster carers to meet the diverse and complex needs of children and young people who require care is one of the most urgent issues confronting our community.

Evidence suggests that community interest in becoming a foster carer remains strong. More than 2000 Victorian householders enquire about becoming foster carers each year, with the rates of enquiry steadily rising over the past five years. However, little more than 10% of enquirers proceed along the journey to become accredited foster carers. Processes to increase the engagement and accreditation of foster carer applicants are critical to ensuring placement availability to meet both current and future needs. These processes and the enquirers who explore them with the possibility of caring for some of our most vulnerable children are the subject of this research.

The study and report form part of a series released by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. The three reports together comprise a detailed review of the provision of and needs for foster care into the future within Victoria and include:

- *Foster Care in Context: An Evaluation of the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy* by Verso Consulting for the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare
- *The Circle Program: An evaluation of a therapeutic approach to Foster Care* by La Trobe University for the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare
- *Pathways to caring: Strategic engagement of potential foster carers.*

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Glossary and definitions

AIHW

Australian Institute for Health and Welfare

CSO

Community Service Organisation: a non-government organisation registered and funded by the Department of Human Services (DHS) to deliver home-based care services. The CSO has responsibility for recruiting, assessing, training, accrediting, supervising and supporting home-based carers.

CFECFW

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

DHS

Victorian Department of Human Services: responsible for human services, child protection, family services and youth justice. The department's mission is to enhance and protect the health and well-being of all Victorians, emphasising vulnerable groups and those most in need. The Department covers the responsibilities for the Ministers of Community Services, Aged Care and Housing.

Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS); 'Foster a Brighter Future' website

A joint initiative for the recruitment and retention of foster carers between the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and organisations providing foster care services, coordinated by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare from 2006–2012 and funded by the Department of Human Services.

Out-of-home care (OOHC)/Home-based Care (HBC)[1, 2, 3, 4]

Out-of-home care provides placement of children aged 0–17 years away from their parents, due to concern that they are at risk of significant emotional, psychological or physical harm or sexual abuse. Its purpose is to provide children who are unable to live with their families a placement that ensures their safety and healthy development and achieves stability. Out-of-home care includes all forms of foster care, kinship care, residential care and permanent care. In most cases, children in out-of-home care are also on a care and protection order. Home based care includes all forms of foster care, kinship care and permanent care. Carers are often provided with reimbursement for expenses relating to the care of the child.

Foster care

Foster care is overnight care provided by non-relative carers in a private household to a child who is living apart from his/her natural or adoptive parent(s). Foster carers undergo retraining and accreditation prior to providing care. The placement is authorised by the responsible state or territory agency. Carers are reimbursed by the state/territory and supported by an approved agency. There are varying degrees of reimbursement made to foster carers.

Emergency foster care

Emergency foster care is provided for children who require a placement immediately due to concerns for their safety. Due to the urgency of these placements, there is usually very little notice before a child is placed with the foster carer. There is generally additional financial reimbursement provided to foster carers for the initial stages of a placement to allow for costs associated with establishing a child in the home.

Long-term foster care

Long-term foster care is arranged when a child cannot return home for some time, or when that outcome is not anticipated. Long-term foster care may cease when a permanent placement is arranged for the child, or when the child reaches adulthood and becomes independent.

Short-term foster care

Short-term foster care is for children who may require a placement for a time period from a couple of weeks up to about six months. Children requiring short-term care are often able to be reunited with their birth parents or extended family at the end of the foster care placement.

1 Department of Human Services (DHS), Victoria 2009, *Child Protection Practice Manual*. From Child Protection in Australia 2009–10: www.dhs.vic.gov.au

2 Department of Human Services (DHS) Victoria 2007, *The Home Based Care Handbook. Revised Edition.*

3 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2011, *Issues Paper Two: Their needs: appropriate service models for vulnerable children, young people and famillies* (Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry 2011 ed.)

4 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011, *Child Protection Australia 2009–10*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p. 4.

Respite foster care

Respite foster care gives full-time foster carers, parents or guardians a regular break, often for one or two weekends a month, or for a week each school holidays. Respite arrangements between parents/guardians and respite foster carers are frequently voluntary, and arrangements are often for a period of six or twelve months.[5]

Kinship care

Kinship or relative care is a placement provided by family members other than parents, or by a person well known to the child and/or family (based on a pre-existing relationship), such as grandparents or adult siblings. Kinship care can be short or long term. The kinship carer may or may not be reimbursed by the state/territory for the care of the child.

PVVCI

Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children's Inquiry, 2011

Residential care

Residential care is a form of out-of-home care where children and young people are cared for by professional staff in community-based residential facilities.

Demand

Demand in the foster care market can be defined as the number of children potentially needing foster care services.[6]

Supply

Supply is all families approved to take foster children into their homes as defined by state approval procedures.

Social marketing

Social marketing is the systematic application of marketing, to achieve specific behavioural goals for a social good. Social marketing can be applied to promote merit goods, or to encourage a society to avoid demerit goods and thus promote society's wellbeing as a whole. Examples include the use of campaigns to encourage people to use seat belts, follow speed limits, increase sun harm prevention behaviour or 'quit' smoking. The primary aim of social marketing is social good; while in commercial marketing, the aim is primarily financial. Increasingly, social marketing is being described as having two parents – a 'social parent', including social science and social policy approaches, and a 'marketing parent', including commercial and public sector marketing approaches.[7]

Mass marketing

An attempt to appeal to an entire market with one basic marketing strategy utilising mass distribution and mass media. Also called undifferentiated marketing.[8]

Target marketing

The use of marketing messages and channel strategy designed to appeal to a specific segment of the population, e.g. a marketing strategy that uses messages and social marketing channels designed to appeal to teenagers.

5 Campbell, C. & Downs, S. W. 1987. The Impact of Economic Incentives on Foster Parents. *Social Service Review*, 61 (4), pp. 509–609.

6 Doyle, J. J. & Peters, H. E. 2007, March, The Market for Foster Care: An Empirical Study of the Impact of Foster Care Subsidies. *Review of Economics of the Household.*

7 National Social Marketing Centre 2013, *http://www.thensmc.com/.* Retrieved 2013

8 http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/mass-marketing.html#ixzz2HRUxbYzr

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We would also like to express our appreciation to all those members of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and the FCCRS project team who worked on the FCCRS from 2006–12, undertaking the strategies and maintaining the data based on enquirers.

The researchers thank Professor Cathy Humphreys, Alfred Felton Chair of Social Work, Melbourne University, for her support and advice with regard to the study concept, ethics and background literature.

Research team

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Amanda is Manager, Research and Social Policy, at the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, and lead researcher on this project, responsible for methodology, questionnaire and survey, data collection and analysis and authoring this report. Amanda has an extensive background in strategic marketing and communications research within the private sector and in social marketing and communications strategy, health promotion research and research and evaluation methodology in the government and not-for-profit sector.

Marilyn Webster

Marilyn is Director, Social Policy and Research, at the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. She has more than 30 years' experience in research, policy and advocacy in the child and family services sector and an extensive knowledge of the legislative, policy, program, governance and research issues both historically and as they currently impact practice and programs. Marilyn's insight and experience guided the literature review and interpretation of this data.

Josh Fergeus

Josh is Policy and Project Leader at the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, responsible for the implementation of the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy from 2009–2012. He has more than 10 years' experience in foster care policy and programs, being an accredited foster carer himself. Josh has provided insight into the interpretation of the data and meaning for policy and strategy.

Executive summary – conclusions and recommendations

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare coordinated the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS) from 2006–2012, a joint initiative of organisations providing foster care services. In addition to publicity and recruitment strategies, the FCCRS included provision of a state-wide data management and referral system, a telephone hotline, a suite of promotional material and the Foster a Brighter Future website. The FCCRS was a key component of Victorian carer recruitment strategies. Other components were regional recruitment strategies coordinated by the Department of Human Services (DHS) and local recruitment strategies undertaken by foster care agencies.

Following the completion of the FCCRS in 2012, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare conducted research with enquirers to the Foster Care Hotline and Foster a Brighter Future website to explore the issues affecting enquirers' choices and decision making. The survey of 370 enquirers provides a wealth of insight critical to attracting foster care enquirers and encouraging them to proceed to accreditation.

The evidence shows that investment in a targeted and centralised recruitment and communications strategy can have substantial impact on community interest – particularly in those segments of the community who do not traditionally think of themselves as being foster carers. Most importantly, the research considers the concerns, community attitudes and information needs that must be addressed if we are to convert enquirers into foster carers and face the challenges involved in the consideration of foster care as one of the viable and sustainable options for the placement of children who cannot live at home.

An end-to-end 'Foster Carer Engagement Strategy'

This research supports the need for an end-to-end Foster Carer engagement strategy that clearly identifies the influences on and the needs of potential foster carers as they progress across the full enquiry-conversion process.

Influences on potential foster carers vary with the engagement phase from activation to post enquiry. This is an important insight from the research. Motivation, needs and barriers that affect the activation of the public differ from the influences that affect continuation of the journey from prospective to potential foster carer.

More clearly and accurately defining the processes of activation, enquiry and conversion as separate steps of the foster care engagement process provides a framework for a successful engagement strategy.

Further research should be undertaken to clearly identify the specific target groups at each of the activation enquiry and conversion stages to clearly delineate an effective engagement process. (Recommendation 16)

Activation

Social marketing strategy

A relatively small investment in a systematic and targeted communication and foster carer acquisition strategy can promote a substantial increase in awareness and enquiry (activation).

A comprehensive communications strategy with tested key messages should be further developed, with the aim of promoting awareness through consistent messages across all media and within targeted groups and communities. (Recommendation 31)

Promotional and communications elements of a targeted mixed methods social marketing strategy, such as the former Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS), show positive returns on investment in:

- raising awareness of naive target markets
- promoting call-to-action behaviour and enquiry from those with an 'innate awareness' and
- in increasing the size of the potential pool of foster carers available for conversion and accreditation. (Recommendation 32)

There is further potential to increase the diversity of the foster carer cohort to meet both overall demand and the needs of particular children through a mixed methods social marketing strategy similar to that of the FCCRS. (Recommendation 1)

More needs to be understood about the profiles of potential foster carers, their needs and motivations and preferred foster caring options so that targeted communications messages will have cut-through and impact.

Targeted messages that will speak to a wider community

To achieve increased diversity and to maintain enquiry rates, communications should not only be aimed at the traditional family – if that is the case, communications messages will fail to have cut through for 1 in 2 potential applicants (47%) – the number of potential carers would be halved. (Recommendation 2)

Communications strategies, such as 'Foster carers come from all walks of life', can be targeted to engage a wider response than that of the 'traditional' Australian family . This offers the potential to increase the family placement options for children requiring care. (Recommendation 3)

Barriers and motivators to activation

This research concentrated on those who had made an enquiry. Insight into the motivations and barriers to activation were necessarily retrospective. Further research is required to fully understand the characteristics of those in áctivation' – both those who have enquired before and those yet to enquire. (Recommendation 17)

The research supports recommendations that activation messages (derived from social marketing approaches) should emphasise positives for both the children and foster families, but also be clear about the reality of foster caring. However extensive communications testing is recommended. A clear understanding of the relationship between specific messages, activation and conversion is critical to effective engagement. (Recommendation 21)

Activation messages (derived from social marketing approaches) must include critical information and redress misconceptions. Information gaps revealed by this research include:

- eligibility criteria
- reimbursement levels
- processes to make an enquiry and obtain a response. (Recommendation 18)

The Image of Foster Caring in the Community

Given the impact of the wider community at every stage of the inquiry process from activation to conversion, the image of Foster Care in the wider community is critical to and should be specific element of a social marketing and engagement strategy. Given the increasing level of enquiry from singles, same-sex couples and males, the role of community attitudes in persuading or dissuading these important potential groups of carers must be more clearly understood. (Recommendation 19)

Research to understand the current image of foster care in the community is critical to effective communications and engagement strategy. Qualitative research with the 'general public' is recommended to clearly understand the information gaps and needs, the image perception and the targeted messages that must be addressed by social marketing campaigns. (Recommendation 22)

Two critical questions for future research to inform a marketing strategy are:

- What are the current images of and opinions about foster caring held by the community?
- What is the influence of misconceptions around foster care or stigma related to foster care on the choice to proceed? (Recommendation 20)

Enquiry

Immediacy of response

Assuring immediate, reliable and effective follow-up of every enquiry minimises loss and supports the re-enquiry process.

Assuring immediate, reliable and effective follow-up of every enquiry will greatly decrease loss and support the re-enquiry process. (Recommendation 15)

Promote repeat enquiry

It would seem that enquiry into being a foster carer is a process that will often take a number of return enquiries to convert an enquirer into a foster care prospect.

Communication and first line response upon enquiry should support this. Processes to encourage re-enquiry could assist in increasing conversion rates – particularly in a strategy to address those who have delayed. (Recommendation 14)

Targeted and informed first line response

The most effective first-line response to enquiry will recognise the broad range of profiles of enquirers, seek to identify the characteristic (or segment) of the enquirer and tailor first-line response to that segment's particular information concerns and training needs. (Recommendation 6)

Females are the driving enquiry force for most enquiries and particularly for heterosexual couples. Given this, enquiry first-line response must communicate to the needs of women. (Recommendation 4)

However, effective enquiry response scripts should also be prepared to respond not only to female enquirers (majority of enquirers) and traditional families but also,

with understanding, to non-traditional families and their specific concerns – single, males, childless enquirers, CALD and other non-traditional market segments – failure to do potentially results in a conversion loss of one third of prospective carers. (Recommendation 5)

Male enquirers are from highly specific and able skill sets – same-sex couples and older post-family males who are living alone. Communication and systems processes must take this into account to ensure the potential of this group is fully employed to the benefit of children requiring care. Specific response processes for male enquirers should be considered in order to respond to their different information, reassurance and support needs. (Recommendation 7)

It is critical to build in cultural competence to both first line response and in recruitment strategies to better identify those with multicultural backgrounds and to encourage them to consider responding to children with particular cultural needs and backgrounds. (Recommendation 8)

Improve understanding of the nature of potential carers

There is an opportunity to improve retention through re-orientation of approach from demands driven to understanding the characteristics of potential carers and how best to utilise that understanding to meet demand for foster care placements.

Systemising better understanding of enquirer potential and preferences into both the first line response to enquiry and into the processes used by agencies who undertake training and accreditation, will pay considerable dividends in the quest to increase movement from enquiry to next phase, increase conversion to accreditation and increase retention.

Further reserach is needed to understand the types of foster care that different enquirer groups will be most interested in (Recommendation 9)

Conversion

Re-activating 'drop outs'– towards a total engagement strategy

One half of enquirers who have withdrawn at any point along the enquiry-accreditation process have not '**dropped out**' but have '**delayed**'. Re-engagement of only one half of the delayed group could potentially increase conversion rates by 20%. Drop out across the process threatens effective and efficient foster carer engagement. Targeting drop-out rates throughout the process is a critical element of effective and efficient acquisition strategy and will potentially have the greatest impact on conversion rates (Recommendation 10)

Engagement and recruitment strategy should re-define those who withdraw from the process – they should not be considered to be lost but, in most cases, to have potential for further engagement and 're-activation' strategy. (Recommendation 11)

Efficient and effective foster care recruitment strategy will include procedures to identify and continue engagement with those delaying or re-considering their choice to proceed. This has the potential to have a marked impact on conversion rates. (Recommendation 12)

The 'delayed group' of potential foster carers are not put off by costs so much as the emotional enormity of the task. It would seem that follow-up of this group with information and support offers a significant opportunity for recruitment and conversion. The role of current foster carers in providing information, support and encouragement at this point in the engagement process must be further explored. (Recommendation 27)

Further research is recommended to explore 'social responsibility' as a motivation in foster care and its influence on those who delay proceeding through the journey to accreditation. Most critically, the relevance or otherwise of this motivation in re-activating interest in foster care would be valuable. (Recommendation 26)

Further research is required to substantiate the dropout rates of very young (less than 29 years) and older (55+ years) potential carers as this will have an impact on the direction and targeting of recruitment strategy. (Recommendation 13)

Barriers to conversion

Costs and resources are the single most critical barrier to conversion to foster caring. Reform of reimbursement levels is urgently required. (Recommendation 23)

It is reasonable to hypothesise that the influence of 'personal readiness' at the time of enquiry is compounded by concern for the impact of foster caring on personal and family resources – costs and time. Further research is required to understand how appropriate information and support structures at the time of enquiry could work to ease these fears for some potential carers. (Recommendation 24)

Systems barriers

An effective and efficient engagement strategy must build improved systems response in the following areas:

- resourcing to maximise follow up of enquiries to centralised intake channels
- elimination of loss at the agency response point in the enquiry-accreditation journey. This could be achieved either by increasing resources for response at the agency level or resourcing centralised (website/ hotline) response processes. (Recommendation 28)

A successful approach to engagement and retention of foster care enquires requires a one-stop , central, top-of-search – list website which provides enquires with reliable consistent information. Most critically, it will be imperative to ensure that enquires are not lost or confused about the options available to them. Internet search resulting in a string of potential foster care engagement opportunities may mean that many foster care enquirers give up at that point.

Multiple enquiry channels may contribute to disaggregation of information necessary for development of comprehensive engagement and recruitment strategies which retain enquirers and target particular populations. (Recommendation 34)

Multiple enquiry channels may contribute to disaggregation of information necessary for development of comprehensive engagement and recruitment strategies which retain inquirers and target particular populations.

The research suggests that some enquirers question whether foster care agencies are in a position to provide unbiased and independent advice about the reality of foster caring in the home and community. The nature and impact of these perceptions on any communication recruitment and education strategy should be explored. (Recommendation 30)

While it is recognised that this survey was undertaken among enquirers to the FCCRS, their choices of channel for information seems to indicate that reliance on engagement with a specific provider or agency of foster care is not necessary to successful communication and engagement strategies. (Recommendation 35)

The way forward

Given the system gaps identified in this study, centralisation of the recruitment and engagement process would seem to hold more potential for recruitment efficiency and conversion success. (Recommendation 29)

A fully resourced centralised response:

- offers the possiblity of independence in providing advice and information
- offers the possibility of eliminating system variability in response
- could ensure consistency of messages and information
- could support the development and implementation of effective communication messages and advice targeted to the information and support needs of diffferent enquirer segments.

There is clearly room for further investment and improvement in the effectiveness of a central website for information and enquiry. Usability studies of the type of information required and increased resources to provide it are recommended. (Recommendation 36)

In order to ensure optimal engagement of enquirers, a communications and recruitment strategy (acquisition strategy) will need a specific SEM (search engine optimisation strategy). (Recommendation 33)

Investment and maintenance in the gains made by the Foster a Brighter Future website are recommended. There is considerable opportunity to build on this SEM strategy to develop a complete, end-to-end engagement methodology. (Recommendation 37)

Future foster carer engagement strategies should aim to have long-term impact through and long-term resourcing of a coherent strategy. (Recommendation 38)

Chapter 1: The context for this research

Demand for out-of-home care in Victoria

Both Australia and Victoria have seen an increased demand for, and growing numbers of children, in out-of-home care.[9, 10, 11]

- The rates of reports of suspected abuse and neglect in Victoria increased by 49%, from 2000–2011.[12]
- Accordingly, the rate of children on orders in Australia increased from 5.9% to 7.6% per 1000 from 2007 to 2011.
- The rate of children per 1000 placed in out-of-home care in Victoria rose from 3.8 in 2005 to 4.6 in 2011.[13]
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) figures show an increase in children and young people in out-of-home care from 3581 in 1999 to 5678 in 2011 (see Figure 1).[14]

The Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry (PVVCI) in 2011, Victoria's pre-eminent investigation into vulnerable children including those in out-of-home care, found that over the past decade the number of children and young people in out-of-home care has increased by 46% – an annual growth of around 4% per year.[15]

Projections of demand by the Department of Human Services (DHS) to the Victorian Ombudsman in 2010 suggested that by 2013–14 there is likely to be 1048 children in Victoria requiring care that the department cannot provide from the out-of-home care budget. The Ombudsman further suggested future demand for out-of-home care will be likely to be greater that even these projections.[16]

The nature of demand for out-of-home care is a complex phenomenon that requires more than the analysis of new, or projected new, cases into care. It also requires consideration of the rate of time spent in care and the rate of leaving care.

It would seem that very recent policy and funding concentrating on strengthening families has contributed to a levelling of the rate of substantiation of orders and progression of vulnerable children to child protection. This has, however, also meant that those children reaching out-of-home care have more complex needs and concomitant less chance of reunification with birth parents.[17] Demand will continue to outpace available placements, largely, it would seem, because the number of children in care (newly placed and already in care) exceeds and will increasingly exceed the number of children who leave care in any one year.[18, 19]

Demand for foster care

Foster care is widely established in many countries, including Australia, as a care option for children who cannot live with their own families. It is one of the three primary forms of out-of-home care in Victoria, alongside residential care and kinship care.

A decline in foster care as a placement choice is a global and national phenomenon of the past 10 years[20, 21, 22] and is the case in Victoria. As of June 2011, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) estimated that the total number of children in foster care in Victoria was 2096.[23] This had decreased from 2234 in June 2010[24] and 2390 in June 2009.[25] Extrapolating trend data over the past decade, DHS has projected that over the period

9 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2010, *Child Protection Australia 2008–09*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
10 AIHW 2011, op.cit., p. 85.
11 Australian Insititute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2012, *Child Protection Australia, 2010–11*. Child Welfare Series no. 53. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
12 Victorian Government 2009, *Out-of-home care: Directions Paper.* State of Victoria.
13 AIHW 2012, op.cit., p. 38.
14 AIHW 2012, op.cit.
15 Cummins, P. Scott, D. & Scales, B. 2011, *Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry (PVVCI) Report.* (Vol. 1). Victorian Government.
16 Ombudsman Victoria 2010, *Own Motion Investigation into Child Protection—Out of Home Care*. Melbourne: Ombudsman Victoria. pp. 13–14
17 AIHW 2012, op.cit., p. 39.
18 ibid., p. 68.
19 Ombudsman Victoria, op.cit.
20 Colton, M., Roberts, S. & Williams, M. 2008, The Recruitment and Retention of Family Foster-Carers: An International and Cross-Cultural Analysis. *British Journal of Social Work*, 38, 865–884. p. 865
21 Randle, M., Miller, L., Dolnicar, S. & Ciarrochi, J. 2012a, *The Science of Attracting Foster Carers. Child and Family Social Work* . DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00881.x. Retrieved Nov, 2012
22 Ombudsman Victoria, op.cit., p. 71.
23 AIHW 2012, op.cit., p. 68
24 AIHW 2011, op.cit.
25 AIHW 2010, op.cit.

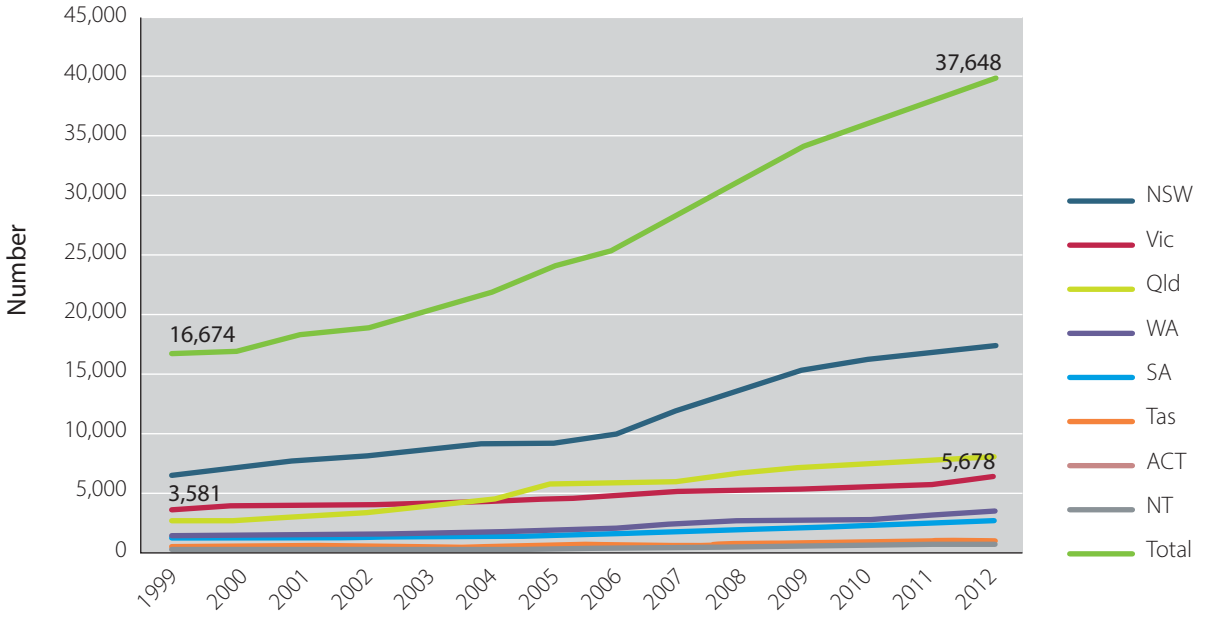


Figure 1: Children aged 0–17 years in out-of-home care by jurisdiction (A time series of numbers of children in care by jurisdiction is included in Appendix 1)

2003–2016, the number of children in foster care will decrease by 58.6% or by an average of 7% each year.[26]

In the context of increasing demand for out-of-home care, it is clear that a changing dynamic within the out-of-home care system within Australia in relation to the role of foster care and kinship care has contributed to an apparent decline in foster care as an out-of-home care preference. There has been an evident reversal of the proportions of children in kinship versus foster care. Kinship care has increased from 26.4% of all children in out-of-home care in 2000–01 to 39.2% in 2010–11. On the other hand, foster care has decreased from 43.5% of all children in out-of-home care in 2000–01 to 25.0% in 2010–11.[27, 28]

However, the true nature of demand for foster care is also a highly complex issue. Evidence would suggest that the assumption that the need for foster care options will continue to diminish fails to acknowledge, predict or address the true level and nature of future need for foster care placements.

A critical question influencing predicted demand for foster care is whether optimal outcomes will be obtained by an increasing reliance on residential care and kinship care options. The Victorian government 'Out-of-home care: Directions paper' (May, 2009) extended the objectives for out-of-home care in Victoria to require that the placements provide more than basic accommodation, food and schooling needs and seek to provide optimal outcomes in health, wellbeing, safety and connectedness.[29] This has also been the focus of federal government policy. The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020 is underpinned by the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It states, as one of six broad outcomes areas, that '… children who have been abused or neglected (must) receive the support and care they need for their safety and wellbeing …'[30]

Residential care placement is not the preferred placement model for children, especially younger children.[31] Moreover, while ideally, placement with extended family would seem to be a preferred option for children removed from their immediate family, there are currently less rigorous screening processes applied for placement into kinship care, fewer support services for

26 Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2005, *Victorian Families, Children and their Carers in 2016: Background Paper Number 1*. Family and Placement Services Sector Development Plan.

27 Verso Consulting 2012, *Foster Care in Context: An Evaluation of the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy*. Melbourne: Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

28 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007b, *Strengthening the Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers in Victoria*. Melbourne: Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. Monograph No. 16. p. vii

29 Victorian Government 2009, op.cit.

30 Council of Australian Governments 2009, *Protecting children is everyone's business: National framework for protecting Australia's children 2009–2020*. (C. C. Australia, Ed.) Retrieved July 10, 2011 from www.coag.gove.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2009–04 30/docs/child_protectiosn_framework.pdf

31 Ombudsman Victoria, op. cit., p. 8.

kinship carers and placement stress and breakdown is common.[32]

The drivers of demand for foster care are contested and, like out-of-home care in general, require consideration of demand as a function of both new demand and those remaining in foster care. A 2010 Ombudsman's own motion report into out-of-home care offered a contrasting analysis of the shift in relative use of different forms of out-of-home care. It concluded that 'the decreasing number of foster care placements is primarily caused by a lack of supply. The department advised that over the past 12 months regions have reported an increasing difficulty in securing suitable foster care placements for children. This is particularly so in relation to adolescent placements and placements in rural regions …'[33]

There is considerable evidence that, given the relative shifts in types of out-of-home care and the characteristics of out-of-home care demand, foster carers in particular are increasingly asked to care for children with more complex needs and challenging behaviours [34] [35] and where the chances of reunification are less likely. This is demanding not only high levels of skill but also longer-term foster care placements. Given this, the Ombudsman argued that 'demand for foster carers has [in fact] increased as children in out of home care, including foster care, are staying longer in care …'[36]

Assessing variation in foster care demand across the United States, Doyle and Peters conclude that:

> *… demand varies across states and across time with changes in measured risk factors. These include drug arrest and other crime rates, child abuse rates, household structure, measures of child poverty and unemployment rates, the racial composition of the population and the prevalence of teen pregnancies. Demand can also be viewed as a function of state preferences … Differences in state policies and procedures regarding the importance of family preservation versus child protection will affect the way in which risk factors translate into foster care placements …*[37]

Victorian policy with regard to many of these preferences is currently in review. At the least, it is clear that shifting policy levers across the family preservation versus child protection spectrum will impact future need for skilled out-of-home care placements such as foster care.

Most critically, however, regardless of relative shifts in the types of out-of-home care placements provided or the impact of policy levers, in absolute terms the need for foster care placements has not diminished.

In its response to the PVVC inquiry, and based on DHS data[38, 39], the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare noted that while the increase was less than that seen in demand for kinship care (14.6%), residential care (9.3%) and permanent care (28.4%), demand for foster care nevertheless increased by 4.5% from March 2010–2011.[40]

> *… from March 2010–March 2011, foster care numbers increased by 4.5% … at this stage, in the context of an increase in out-of-home care demand, the absolute numbers of foster care placements required has not decreased while the number of available placements has decreased …*[41]

Clearly a way forward for increasing and maintaining both the availability and quality of foster care placements will be critical to the Victorian out-of-home care response at least over the next decade.

Diminishing supply of foster carers

As noted by the Ombudsman[42], placed against this complex environment of demand is a vastly diminishing supply of foster carers and foster care placements in Victoria.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported a critical decline in available foster care placements in Victoria across 2011:

- While there were 1574 households with a placement during 2010–11, there were only 899 such households at the end of June 2011.[43]
- This downward trend was also found across 2009–2010. An available 1612 placements during 2009–10 reduced to 907 by June 2010[44] (see Tables 1 and 2 below).

32 Ombudsman Victoria, op. cit., p. 11.
33 Ombudsman Victoria, op. cit.
34 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2011, op. cit., p. 6.
35 Ombudsman Victoria, op. cit., p. 70.
36 Ombudsman Victoria, op. cit., p. 66.
37 Doyle & Peters, op. cit., p. 4

38 Department of Human Services 2010–11, Annual Report 2010–2011. Retrieved September 17, 2011 from Additional data retreived: www.dhs.vic.gov.au/anout-the-department/our-organisation/annual-reports/department-of-human-services-annual-report-2010–11/additional-data-in-support-of-the-2011-report#content-heading-1
39 Department of Human Services 5 August, 2010, CRIS 31 March 2010, Children Aged 0–17. *Presentation at Coalition for Change.*
40 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2011, op. cit., p. 6.
41 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2011, op.cit.
42 Ombudsman Victoria, op. cit.
43 AIHW 2012, op. cit., p. 41.
44 AIHW 2011, op. cit.

- Exit of foster care households greatly exceeded entry across all the years of 2009–2011 (see Tables 1 and 2 below).
- In addition, existing capacity in foster care placements that remain is over-stretched – 40–45% of foster carers have two or more children in placement at any one time.[45]

There are fewer foster care placements available than ever before. Supply of foster carers – even in the context of diminishing demand – is inadequate to meet that demand. In a scenario of constant absolute demand for new and ongoing places, the supply-demand mismatch is at a critical point.

Many authors have noted the impact of current social trends on the pool of willing foster carers. The factors influencing this derive from potential foster families' opportunity costs. There is an increase in the number of women in the workforce, which means that there are fewer non-working females, the group that has traditionally formed the majority of foster carers.[46, 47, 48]

In terms of suitability, prospective carers need to have both motivation and capacity to foster but few people have both of these qualities.[49]

Increasingly complex needs and challenging behaviours of those children entering, or currently in, out-of-home care create another barrier in attracting foster carers, influencing the entry of new foster care placements.[50, 51, 52, 53] Additionally, complex needs exacerbate the stress on current placements and contribute to increased exit of those currently available. The impact is then circular and self-feeding: those foster care placements remaining in the system are at greater stress – leading to higher levels of exit and further stress on supply.

Most critically, the tension between demand and supply not only places stress on placement availability, it leads to negative consequences, such as the diversion of children to ad hoc arrangements that provide lower quality of care at greater cost[54] or children being placed with foster carers who may not be best suited to meet their needs, which in turn could lead to placement failure.[55]

Table 1: Foster care placement and exit data, AIHW, 2013[56]

Table 5.2: Foster carer households with a placement, states and territories, at 30 June 2012 and during 2011–12

Households	NSW[(a)]	Vic	Qld[(b)]	WA[(c)]	SA	Tas[(d)]	ACT	NT	Total
Households with a placement at 30 June 2012	3,886	932	2,201	687	634	194	154	136	8,824
Household with a placement during 2011–12	4,797	1,615	2,697	1,024	786	291	249	205	11,664

Table 5.3: Number of households commencing and exiting foster care, 2011–12

Households	NSW[(a)]	Vic	Qld[(b)]	WA[(c)]	SA	Tas[(d)]	ACT	NT	Total
Households commencing foster care	572	434	539	166	131	88	37	150	2,117
Households exiting foster care	n.a.	453	443	236	108	59	18	99	1,416

45 AIHW 2012, loc. cit.

46 Ombudsman Victoria, op. cit., p. 70.

47 McHugh, M 2006, Indirect Costs of Fostering and their Impact on Carers. Communities, Children and Families Australia vol. 2, no. 1, 2 (1), 73–85. p. 74

48 Degenhardt, G. & Gostt, K. 2000, Children in Crisis: Trends in Out-Of-Home Care in Victoria. Melbourne: Anglicare Victoria, p. 24

49 Colton et al., op. cit., p. 867.

50 Degenhardt & Gostt, op.cit., p. 25.

51 McHugh 2006, op. cit., p. 75.

52 Ombudsman Victoria, loc. cit.

53 McHugh, M. & Valentine, K. 2010, *Financial and Non-Financial Support to Formal and Informal Out-Of-Home Carers: Final Report.* Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Occasional Paper No. 38. p. 4

54 Ombudsman Victoria, op. cit., p. 71.

55 Tomison & Stanley 2001, *Strategic Directions in Child Protection: Informing Policy and Practice. South Australian Department of Human Services.* Unpublished report. p. 114. http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/SAbrief/SAbrief6.pdf. retrieved 26/11/12

56 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013, *Child Protection Australia: 2011–12. Child Welfare series no. 55.* Cat. no. CWS 43. Canberra: AIHW.

Table 2: Foster care placement and exit data, AIHW, 2012[57]

Table 5.2: Foster carer households with a placement, states and territories, at 30 June 2011 and during 2010–11

Households	NSW[(a)]	Vic	Qld[(b)]	WA[(c)]	SA	Tas[(d)]	ACT	NT	Total
Households with a placement at 30 June 2011	3,735	899	2,090	685	584	204	117	135	8,449
Household with a placement during 2010–11	4,579	1,574	2,583	1,006	752	283	170	216	11,163

Table 5.3: Number of households commencing and exiting foster care, 2010–11

Households	NSW[(a)]	Vic	Qld[(b)]	WA[(c)]	SA	Tas[(d)]	ACT	NT	Total
Households commencing foster care	585	226	338	251	86	53	24	113	1,676
Households exiting foster care	n.a.	291	439	195	53	33	53	128	1,192

Table 3: Foster care placement and exit data, AIHW, 2011[58]

Table 5.2: Foster carer households with a placement, states and territories, at 30 June 2011 and during 2010–11

Households	NSW[(a)]	Vic	Qld[(b)]	WA[(c)]	SA	Tas[(d)]	ACT	NT	Total
Households with a placement at 30 June 2011	3,735	899	2,090	685	584	204	117	135	8,449
Household with a placement during 2010–11	4,579	1,574	2,583	1,006	752	283	170	216	11,163

Recruitment and retention of new foster carers

The need to use both retention and recruitment strategies to maintain sufficient foster care places is clearly critical to the current Victorian out-of-home care response.

Recruitment of new foster carers is a time-consuming and costly process, however, there is evidence of a positive return on investment and clear cost benefits in resourcing recruitment strategies for foster care. Foster care is less resource-intensive than residential care, the most common alternative form of care used in place of foster care.[59] [60]

It has been consistently shown that only 6% to 10% of enquirers result in approved foster families. However, it is also clear that while conversion rates remain low, enquiry rates have not diminished. Indeed, over 2006–2011, the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS) initiated by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare evidenced enquiry rates that increased to record levels.[61]

On the other hand, while there has been significant focus on (if not significant funds for) foster recruitment in recent years in Victoria, a gap between demand and supply still exists. Clearly, recruitment strategies that end at interest and enquiry are not enough and higher conversion rates are needed to offset increasing attrition rates for the foster carer pool.

There must be realistic expectations of what can be accomplished through recruitment. Improved recruitment strategies will not have an extensive impact on demand and capacity issues without program impact on retention and consideration of the high level of qualities and skills needed in foster carers into the future.

However, a mixed approach of marketing and community development strategies, together with therapeutic approaches to program delivery, would seem to hold the most promise for improved recruitment and retention rates.[62, 63]

57 AIHW 2011, op. cit., p. 58.

58 AIHW 2012., op. cit.

59 L. Keogh and U. Svensson, 'Why Don't They Become Foster Carers', Children Australia, vol. 24, no. 2, 1999, cited in Degenhardt & Gostt, op. cit., p. 24.

60 R. Lawrence, 'Recruiting Carers for Children in Substitute Care: The Challenge of Program Revision', Australian Social Work, vol. 47, no. 1, 1994, pp. 37–42, cited in Bromfield, Higgins, Osborn, Panozzo, & Richardson, 2005, *Out-Of-Home Care in Australia: Messages from Research*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies p. 8 retrieved 26 November 2012, <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/outofhome/outofhome.pdf.

61 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2012, *Fact Sheet: Home-based Care*. Retrieved January 2013 from www.cfecfw.asn.au

62 Ombudsman Victoria, loc. cit.

63 Frederico, M., McNamara, P., McPherson, L., Rose, R. & Gilbert, K. 2012, *The Circle Program: An Evaluation of a Therapeutic Approach to Foster Care.* Melbourne: Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

There are clearly three critical questions towards achieving better outcomes for children requiring out-of-home care:

- Can we successfully and cost-effectively ensure ongoing community interest and enquiry (community awareness and 'call to action')?
- How do we increase recruitment of new carers, increasing conversion rates from enquirers to prospective carers to practising carers (commitment and conversion strategy)?
- How do we to ensure retention of current care providers (attrition reduction/programmatic strategy)?

The application of these questions to the engagement, recruitment and retention of foster carers is a critical part of out-of-home care policy and responsiveness in the current Victorian context.

Chapter 2: The Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS)

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECFW/the Centre), formerly the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria, has been involved in the coordination and consolidation of foster care recruitment and promotion since the early 1990s. The Centre ran the Victorian Foster Care Recruitment Project for 17 years, providing a central information and referral point for public enquiries into becoming a foster carer and conducting media and promotional campaigns to raise awareness. This included the establishment and ongoing management of the Foster Care Hotline, and more recently, the Foster a Brighter Futures website as central information and referral channels and services for prospective foster carers in Victoria.

In June 2006, the Victorian Minister for Children and Minister for Community Services approved one-off funding of $500,000 to develop and implement the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS) – a strategy to strengthen Victoria's approach to foster care recruitment and retention. The Centre implemented this communication and recruitment strategy in full until mid-2012 and a small-scale phone enquiry line through 2012.

The FCCRS was a key component of Victorian carer recruitment strategies across the period. Other components were regional recruitment strategies coordinated by DHS and local recruitment strategies undertaken by foster care agencies, including tactics such as local media or specific recruitment projects.

The aim of the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS) project was to develop a comprehensive foster care communication and recruitment strategy for Victoria over three to five years.

The objectives of the FCCRS were achieved through various sub-projects and phases, as detailed below.

Phases of the FCCRS

Phase 1

The first phase consisted of a needs analysis to identify the supply and demand gap in the foster carer pool, a literature review and analysis of effective practices in foster carer recruitment, consultation with foster carers who have left regarding their reasons for leaving and consultation with community service organisations (CSOs) about successful and unsuccessful practices in foster care recruitment. The report from this stage informed the market research phase.

Phase 2

The second phase had two elements. The first was commissioning market research and undertaking an engagement process led by the Centre with CSOs around good recruitment practice. The second was the establishment of the marketing and promotional activities, the Hotline and the Foster a Brighter Future website, and the online referral database.

Phase 3

The third phase provided evaluation of the project and recommendations for further action to inform ongoing improvements to the state-wide foster care recruitment strategy. An evaluation by Verso Consulting[64] undertaken in 2012 for the Centre provided a state-of-play report on the supply and demand aspects of the Victorian foster care system, and recommendations for future action in the area of foster carer intake and retention, in the context of the completion of the two previous stages. A key activity identified to support ongoing success and evaluation of future recruitment strategy was the development of a system for standardised regular collection of statistics about enquirers to enable tracking of enquiries from initial enquiry through stages leading up to approval as a foster carer.

64 Verso Consulting, op. cit.

Program components of the FCCRS

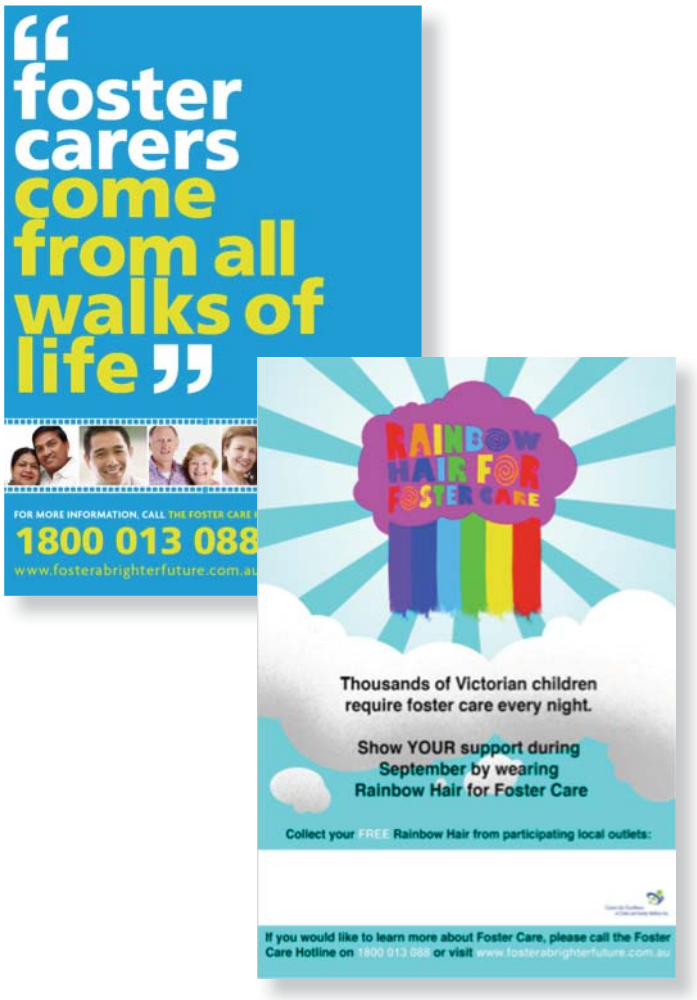
- Foster a Brighter Future website
- Foster Care Hotline
- A suite of promotional material, including 'Rainbow Hair for Foster Care'
- Information packs
- Community-based engagement activity
- Mass media communications and publicity through small-scale regional TV and radio and wider scale print, poster and local newspaper channels
- Agency activity coordinated on the consistent key messages an using standard collateral
- The online enquiry database – a state-wide data management and referral system
- Quarterly state-wide foster care publicity recruitment network and strategy meetings with foster care providers

Although the FCCRS constituted only a relatively small investment in funding for recruitment of foster carers over its five-year duration, there is much to learn from the FCCRS for future recruitment strategy.

Of particular note was the opportunity to survey enquirers to the FCCRS Foster a Brighter Future website and hotline in order to gain an understanding of the reason for enquiry and the reasons for failing to convert. This was the intent of this research and the focus of the findings of this report.

Marketing collateral associated with the FCCRS

Figure 2: Examples of the FCCRS marketing collateral



Chapter 3: Literature review

This literature review provides an overview of theoretical approaches and learnings from research around the issues pertinent to recruiting and retaining foster carers. A more comprehensive review of this body of knowledge was used to inform the research questions about the pathways of foster care enquirers in Victoria and the structure of the survey questionnaire for this research.

The theory of foster carer engagement

Conceptual map of the foster care recruitment literature

A number of disciplines inform approaches to the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Their relevance, relationship and connection with the research questions driving this research is set out in the following concept map.

Each of the different theoretical bases has a specific contribution to thinking in this space. Nevertheless the holistic contribution of these theoretical streams holds most promise for recruitment methodology. Recent literature on the recruitment of foster carers has identified recruitment as a process that is best conceptualised as interacting with different levels of intent and engagement of potential foster carers and is, in itself, part of the overall process of foster carer engagement – from recruitment to retention.

Viewed as part of a process – beginning at community awareness, continuing through enquiry and accreditation to foster care placement and ending at exit of the foster carer or placement – enables targeted approaches to engage with enquirers at different stages of the recruitment to accreditation process but, most critically, ensures that each stage of the process is understood as contributing to the overall outcome of maximising attraction and retention across all stages of the process.

Figure 3: Conceptual map of foster care recruitment literature

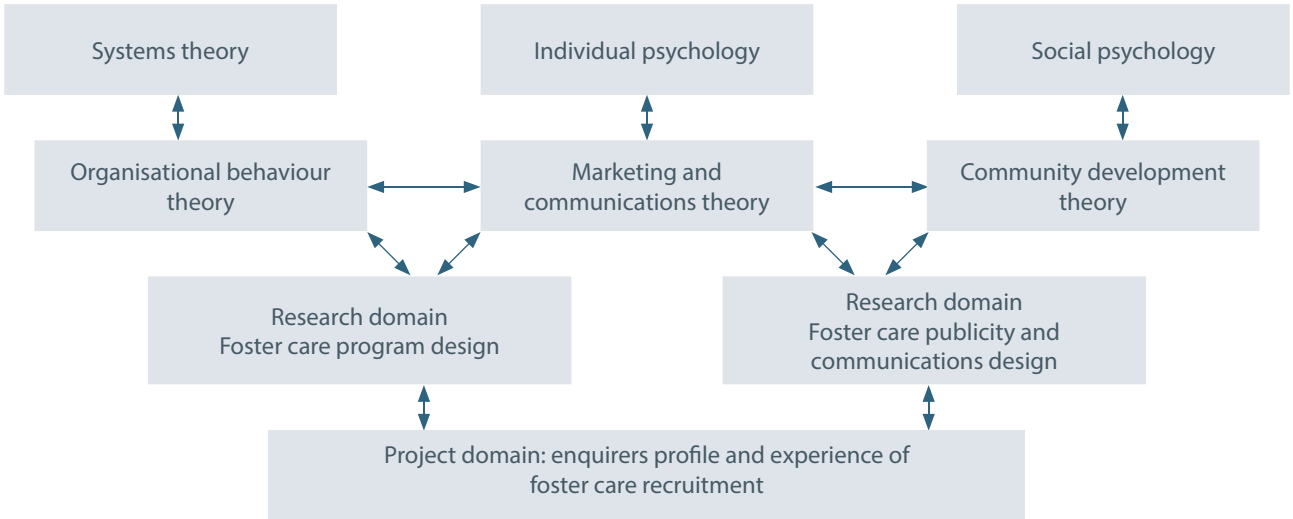
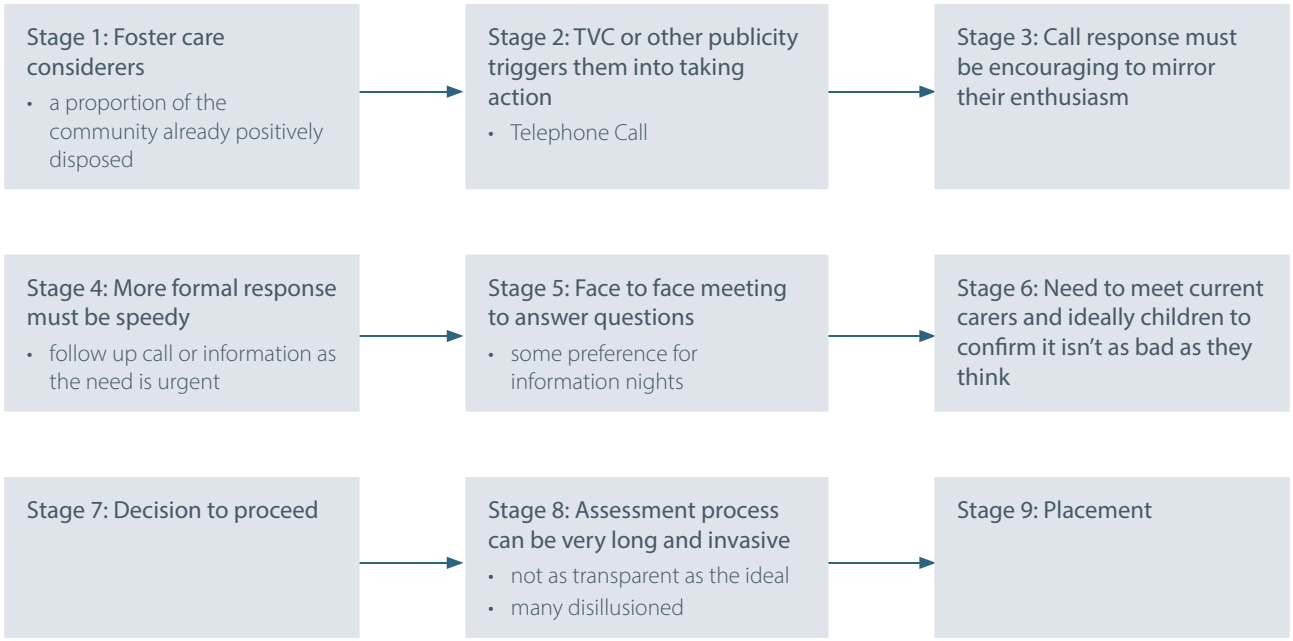


Figure 4: The enquirer activation process – CFECFW (CWAV), 2002[66]



Recruitment methodology – an end-to-end process

The Children's Welfare Association of Victoria (CWAV, the precursor organisation to the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare) early identified the 'process' nature of recruitment based on research findings from Quantum Market Research 2002.[65] Understanding recruitment as a process in itself underpinned an initial exposition of the stages through which a potential foster carer will move and consideration of the different strategies that are needed at each of these stages. An 'activation process' was identified to describe the interaction between the personal attributes of the community member disposed to becoming a carer, the stages through which the potential foster carer moves and the formal foster care recruitment process (see Figure 4).

Bromfield et al argued for a 'whole of process' approach highlighting the interlinked nature of carer recruitment, assessment, training, retention and support.[67] They noted that assessment practices can influence the perceptions of potential carers, and be a barrier to recruitment, while levels of training and support are likely to influence retention. Recruitment goes hand-in-hand with the retention of foster carers when considering the overall supply of foster carers. When the supply of foster carers is low, current carers tend to be overloaded, which creates additional stress and increases the likelihood of placement instability.[68] They argued that is it important to be cautious not to lose sight of the importance of retaining carers while improving recruitment strategies and of the role of recruitment strategy as part of an overall response to foster care program design, support and retention.[69]

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare reviewed evidence about processes to strengthen the recruitment and retention of foster carers in Victoria in literature up to 2007.[70] Portrayed in Figure 5 below, this document contended that, while inevitably interlinked, the issues of recruitment, retention, assessment, training, carer support and services for children are separate concepts, requiring specific strategies. Most notably, this approach directed attention to the multiple points of 'dropout' in the process.

65 Quantum Market Research 2002, *Foster Care Recruitment Qualitative Research Report*. Melbourne: Children's Welfare Association of Victoria unpublished

66 ibid.

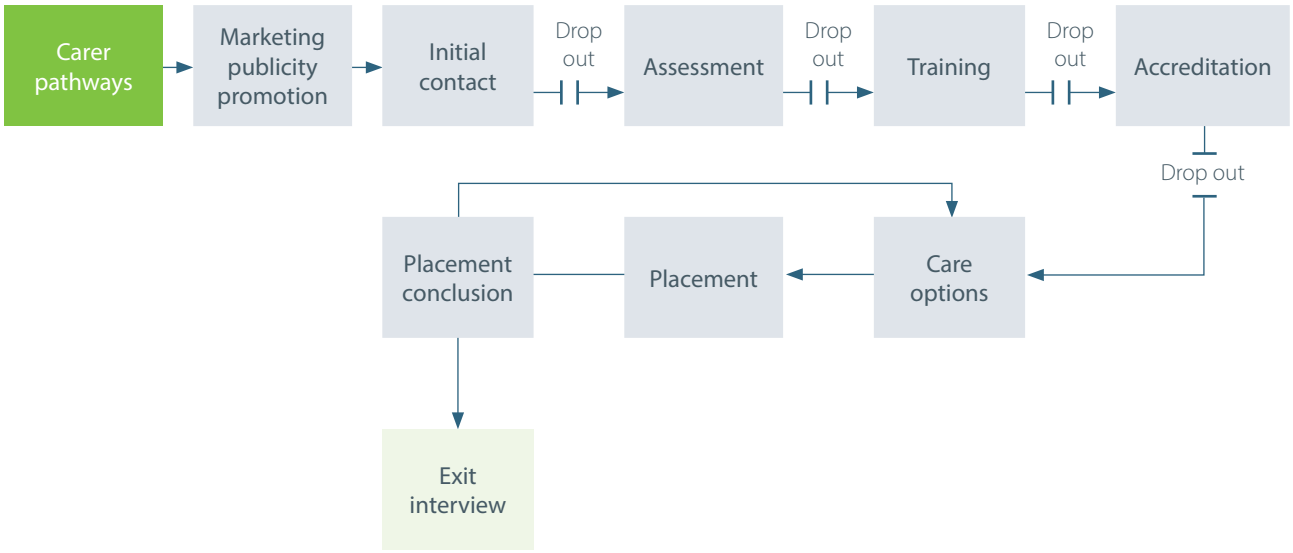
67 Bromfield, L., Higgins, D., Osborn, A., Panozzo, S. & Richardson, N 2005, *Out-Of-Home Care in Australia: Messages from Research*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. retrieved 26 November 2012, http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/outofhome/outofhome.pdf.

68 ibid.

69 ibid.

70 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007b, *Strengthening the Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers in Victoria*. Melbourne: Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. Monograph No. 16

Figure 5: Standardised foster carer recruitment and retention process[71]



In 2012, Verso Consulting, for the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECFW), developed a foster care process map that further described the stages of progress, and provided critical insight into the influences that might affect continuation at each stage of progress, as potential foster carers proceed from public to actively interested, to long- term foster care providers (see Figure 6 on page 27).[72]

Critically, the Verso/CFECFW foster care process map proposes that successful recruitment methodology will require not only that stages of the process be clarified but that each must be clearly understood in terms of who is the target audience, the specific communications and response strategies needed, and the relative impact of various influences (including other stages of the process) that will affect continuation.

Towards a foster carer engagement strategy

Most critically for recruitment methodology, the Verso/CFECFW foster care process map prompts the consideration that there are four clear stages in the process of becoming and being a foster carer (see Figure 6 below):

1. **Activation stage:** activating 'general public' to become active 'information seekers.
2. **Enquiry stage:** information seekers become 'enquirers' and then move to 'prospective foster carers'.
3. **Conversion stage:** 'potential foster carers' (prospects who have completed screening processes) undertake the training and accreditation process to become 'accredited (active) foster carers'.
4. **Retention stage:** 'active (new) foster carers' are retained to provide foster care over a long term.

Conversion rates (dropout) are influenced at all stages of the process and understanding the barriers, motivations and the target audience at each point will critically affect conversion rates from general public to accredited carer.

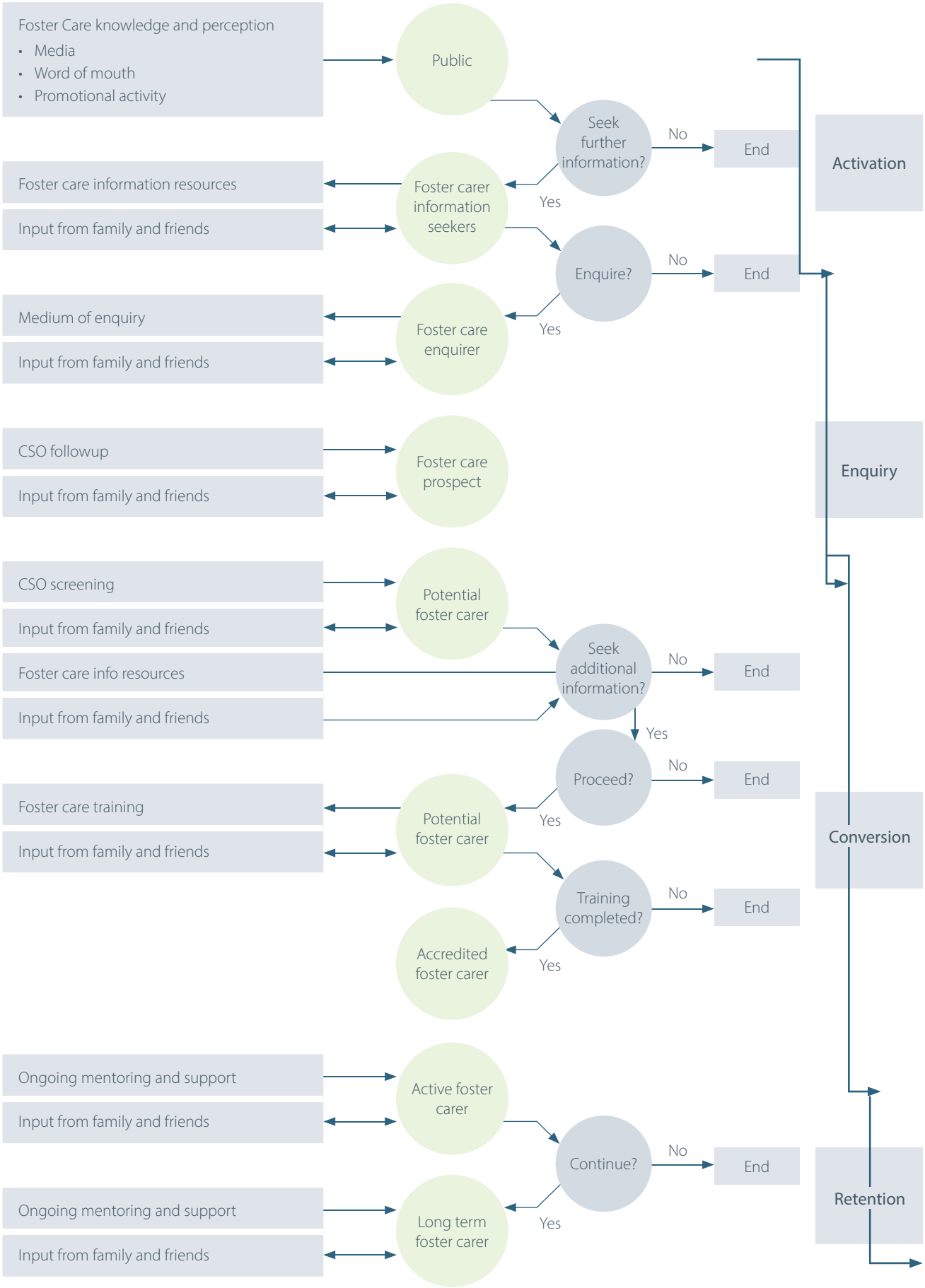
From this perspective, it can be argued that effective recruitment methodology will require an end-to-end foster carer engagement strategy linking the interactions across stages of the foster carer recruitment to accreditation journey, combining mass media, community-based and targeted marketing strategies and incorporating support and development strategies into program design.

The terminology used, intent and aim of recruitment methods and methodologies are neither clear nor consistent across different recruitment processes or studies in the foster care literature. However, our review of the foster carer recruitment literature suggests that recruitment methodologies typically take one, or combine a selection, of four types.[74]

- Mass media/social marketing campaigns – including general and local TV, radio and print media, and broad-based print, poster, billboard campaigns. These

71 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007b, op cit.
72 Verso Consulting, op. cit.
73 Verso Consulting, op. cit., p 16.
74 Cox, M. E., Buehler, C. & Orme, J. G. 2002, Recruitment and Foster Family Service. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare,* XXiX (No 3), pp. 151–177.

Figure 6: Building on the Verso/CFECFW foster care process map[73]



campaigns are typified by one message across a broad public audience.

- Targeted strategies – those strategies aimed at specific segments of foster carer prospects. Targeted strategies may aim to recruit specific segments of the general population or to recruit foster carers for specific segments of foster children, such as those with special needs or from specific cultural groups or with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) characteristics, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Local or community-based strategies – including community development approaches, culturally relevant processes and the leveraging of local civic and church-based organisations.
- Person-to-person strategies – including word-of-mouth marketing and recruitment using current foster carers.

It is informative to review recent foster care recruitment literature and recruitment methodologies and evidence with regard to its insight into the stages of progression of the foster carer engagement process, the inhibitors and enablers of progress at each stage and the efficacy of different marketing strategies at each stage of progression.

Activation

Raising public awareness through social (mass) marketing

It is widely considered that general community awareness of foster care is an important aspect of increasing the number of prospective foster carers. Recent studies have found that as many as 40–52% of the general community do not know anything about foster care.[75] Of these, 40% indicate that they would consider becoming foster carers in the future if they had known about it.[76] Moreover, recent segmentation research into the reasons why people do not decide to become foster carers identified a critical need for community awareness. A segment of potential opportunity to conversion, designated the 'never been asked' segment, was apparent. This segment – almost one third of all respondents – indicated that they had not considered foster caring before, not because they perceived themselves as unable or disinterested, but because 'no-one had ever asked them to'.[77]

There is evidence that public marketing campaigns can activate enquiry behaviour. In 2010, a three-month NSW Government advertising campaign resulted in a significant increase in interest and information collection through website hits and call centre enquiries, and in foster care applications (NSW Government 2010).[78] A relatively small annual investment in the dedicated enquiry line and publicity strategy through the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS) in Victoria found that by 2011, 13,736 hits were recorded on the Foster a Brighter Future recruitment website – an increase of 44.5% on the previous year. In total, 2095 households actively enquired about providing foster care across both this website and other enquiry channels – the highest number of enquirers on record.[79]

It would seem that there is a critical role for social marketing recruitment campaigns aimed at the general population. However, the aim of these campaigns must be carefully thought through. In the context of 'activation' of foster carers, social marketing must be recognised to have two goals: firstly, to 'activate' and recruit foster parents in the short term (immediate prospects); secondly, campaigns must recognise their role in raising public awareness about fostering and the need for foster families in order to stimulate 'activation' into the future.[80]

Image of foster care

Most critically, evidence would suggest that the role of social marketing campaigns in promoting positive messages around foster care is more complex than stimulating action in those predisposed to become carers. A third, not so widely recognised aim is to influence the image of foster caring in the community. That involves not just positive messages to support call to action in the short and longer term, but the promotion of a positive and supportive community attitude.

Looking at message content with most impact for conversion, Randle et al. (2012) suggest that messages communicated in marketing campaigns should properly represent what is actually involved in foster caring but that 'communication efforts [should also] focus on the many positive aspects of foster caring that are more likely to encourage people who find these aspects of foster care motivating …'[81]

The role of negative community images on recruitment of foster carers has been recognised internationally. For those who are aware of foster care, some have a negative

75 Randle et al., 2012a, op. cit., p. 11.
76 Randle, M., Miller, L., Dolnicar, S. & Ciarrochi, J 2012b, Heterogeneity Among Potential Foster Carers: An Investigation of Reasons for Not Foster Caring, *Australian Social Work*, 65 (3), 382–397
77 Randle et al., 2012a, op. cit.
78 NSW Government 2010, cited in Randle, et al., 2012a, op. cit., p. 7.
79 Verso Consulting, op. cit.
80 Cox et al., op. cit., p 151
81 Randle et al., 2012a, op. cit.

impression of it [82, 83] which suggests the need to improve its image when recruiting new carers.[84] It is believed that publicising positive real-life stories seemed to be effective in counteracting this negativity.[85] Perceived negative stereotypes of foster children are often disproportionate to the actual issues the children have, and it is posited that these misconceptions can be dispelled by advertising and public education campaigns.[86] An examination of recruitment and retention issues across the USA, the UK and Ireland identified fear of the unknown among prospective carers in the community – often affected by negative media coverage and public perceptions of children who require care – as being a significant influence on decreasing foster carer supply.[87, 88, 89]

Effective engagement methodology will recognise that social/mass marketing for recruitment of foster carers will have three goals and three target audiences:

- to positively impact the image and profile of foster caring in the community (whole-of-community audience)
- to raise public awareness (future prospects)
- to convert (immediate prospects).

Target audience/segment marketing

While social marketing clearly has a place, there is more to be understood about the impact of social marketing on the activation of immediate prospects – that is, the impact on 'call to action'. Raising public awareness does not in itself usually promote 'call to action'. Evidence has shown that publicity is a critical trigger in stimulating call to action in the segment of the population who are already aware of and disposed to becoming foster carers[90]; many who do become foster carers indicate that they had always planned to foster a child.[91]

As far back as 1995[92] there was recognition of the need for a marketing approach to recruitment methodology.

82 Ombudsman Victoria, loc. cit.

83 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy Research Report: Internal Document,* 2007a, unpublished report, CFECFW, p. 91.

84 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007a, op. cit., p. xiii.

85 Ombudsman Victoria, loc. cit.

86 Quantum Market Research, op. cit., p. 78.

87 Pell, A 2008, *Churchill Fellow, An examination of the progress of Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers in the USA, UK and in the Republic of Ireland.* The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia.

88 Marcenko, M., Brennan, K. & Lyons, S. 2009 as cited in Verso Consulting, op. cit. p. 55

89 Verso Consulting, op. cit., p. 55.

90 Quantum Market Research, op. cit.

91 McHugh, M., McNab, J., Smuth, C., Chalmers, J., Siminski, P. & Saunders, P. 2004, *The availability of foster carers: Main report*. Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre.

92 Cox et al., op. cit.

In particular, this was a call for recruitment endeavour to take account of the required target audience before pursuing a strategy. In the USA, Pasztor and Wynne noted that state-of-the-art in practice and policy in recruitment and retention of foster carers will require 'systematic recruitment effort, as well as recruitment strategies that are aimed at reaching and attracting potential foster parents with specific characteristics …'[93] This has been endorsed by numerous reviews of foster care recruitment methodology[94, 95] and is gaining increased acceptance in foster carer recruitment methodology.

Recent evidence has suggested that more effective public marketing strategies will seek to target and leverage those most disposed to act by identifying market segments in accordance with their potential to convert awareness to action and defining communications strategies tailored to the characteristics of each segment and an in-depth understanding of the motivators that translate intent into action.[96] 'Call to action' social marketing and publicity will identify the target audience segments with most immediate potential to become foster carers and develop strategies and messages that directly speak to them.

Studies of foster families

Numerous studies have considered the supply-demand issues by obtaining insight into foster carer motivations and demography – by asking and profiling foster carers.[97] These studies considered that increasing supply required understanding of the particular characteristics of those who become foster carers.[98, 99]

Socio-demographic segmentation studies

Systematic attempts to explore and profile those who might become foster carers have been based largely on the demographic characteristics of those who have already made the decision to become carers.[100]

Studies from Canada reported foster carers as more likely to be married, Caucasian and have one person in the household in paid employment.[101] Australian data identifies foster carers as more likely to be female, English speaking, between the ages of 35 and 54 and earning

93 Pasztor and Wynne, 1995, Foster Carer retention and recruitment: The state of the art in practice and policy. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America as cited in Cox, et al., op. cit.

94 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007b, op. cit.

95 Marcenko et al., op. cit.

96 Randle et al. 2012a, op. cit.

97 Bebbington, A. & Miles, J. 1990, The Supply of Foster Families for Children in Care. *British Journal of Social Work,* 20, 283–307.

98 Colton et al., op. cit.

99 McHugh et al. 2004 op. cit.

100 Randle et al. 2012a, op. cit.

101 ibid

a mid-range income. While evidence of post-school education varies, carer households were identified to be largely headed by couples.[102, 103]

However, it is apparent that studies of the characteristics of foster carers provide only a confused picture for engagement strategy. Early British research attempted to predict supply gaps by comparing the demography of current foster carers with the incidence of these 'types' in local authority areas. They found that 'supply' as defined by demography was best in those areas with least need and that was unhelpful to recruitment strategies for localities of most need.[104]

Psychographic segmentation studies – motivations and barriers

Studies of motivations of foster carers have provided some further insights and suggest that individuals who foster care do so for altruistic reasons associated with the desire to make a positive difference to outcomes for disadvantaged children.[105, 106] Using a retrospective nation-wide stratified sample, Cox, Buehler and Orme[107] examined the interaction of how foster parents in the USA became aware of foster caring (awareness source)[108] with their background (demographic) characteristics and the nature of the foster care service they provided. They examined:

- Demographic characteristics: income, marital status, number of children, adopted children, race, age, educational level and employment status.
- Awareness source: television or radio, other foster parent, through church or religious organisation, through civic or community organisation or other category (e.g. enquired about adoption and told about fostering or was a foster child).
- Foster care service provided: numbers of children fostered, number of years fostering, categories of special needs fostered (developmentally delayed, physically disabled, drug exposed, alcohol exposed, HIV positive, sexually abused, emotionally disturbed).
- Motivation: a factor analysis of 27 characteristics revealed three groupings described as 'wanting children', 'giving to children' and 'satisfying family needs'.[109]

They found that awareness source was not affected by demography. Moreover, demography and awareness source largely did not predict duration of foster care service and number of children fostered, or intention to continue fostering. This was more consistently predicted by the motivation to be a carer and a desire to 'give to children'.[110]

This and other foster carer based studies suffer from critical methodological limitations in terms of their meaning for engagement methodology. Firstly, because they use a sample of current foster carers, these approaches are more indicative of the current outcomes of past recruitment, retention and program realities than they are a useful indication of who best to target into the future. Most critically, they required unreliable retrospective recall from current foster parents. The motivators that underlie a person enquiring or not enquiring to become a foster carer will be necessarily 'coloured' by experience – particularly for foster carers 'in the system'. Studying current foster carers[111] will only provide a post hoc analysis of the barriers to becoming a foster carer.

In further work, Orme et al.[112] noted the dearth of prospective knowledge drawn from examining the characteristics of foster-family applicants and noted that 'thus we have limited understanding as to the best means of recruiting, assessing, training and supporting them.' Effective targeted and engagement strategy will require research identifying the demography and motivations of enquirers – the target audience. This is critical to the identification of the characteristics of those for whom targeted marketing might have most impact. Research that follows enquirers prospectively is critical to examine the different effects of recruitment methods at points in the recruitment process and family life cycle on intent to foster and 'call to action'.[113, 114, 115]

Studies of 'lapsed carers'

Much less attention has been paid to the reasons why people do not consider foster caring or why enquirers

102 McHugh et al. 2004, op. cit.

103 Wilks, S. & Wise, S. 2011, *The Care Factor: Rewards and Challenges of Raising Foster Children*. Melbourne: Anglicare Victoria.

104 Bebbington & Miles, op. cit.

105 Ciarrochi, J. V., Randle, M. J., Miller, L. M. & Dolnicar, S. 2012, Hope for the future: Identifying the individual difference characteristics of people who are interested in and intend to foster-care. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42 (1), 7–25. p. 5

106 Ciarrochi et al., op. cit., p. 15

107 Cox et al., op. cit.

108 Note: Studies completed before the application of social media and web-based channel for recruitment

109 Cox et al., op. cit., p. 160.

110 ibid, p. 166.

111 Randle et al. 2012a, op. cit.

112 Orme, J. G. 2004, Parental and familial characteristics of family foster care applicants. *Children and Youth Services Review,* 26, 307–329.

113 Tomison & Stanley, op. cit.

114 Randle et al.l 2012b, op. cit.

115 Ciarrochi et al., op. cit.

decide to not proceed with accreditation. However, studies of this segment will provide critical insight for recruitment strategy and marketing messages.

Most studies that have examined this issue are based on the analysis of the reports of foster carers who have stopped being carers and/or the analysis of socio-demographic trends in the community that may be acting to delimit enquiry and accreditation. The barriers most commonly identified include: costs associated with foster caring, lack of time, and increased number of women engaged in the full-time workforce and therefore unable to foster.[116, 117, 118, 119]

Consideration has been given to some motivational factors such as a decrease in aspiration and values around volunteering in the community and insecurities regarding the ability to manage a foster child.[120] Again, however, these studies provide only retrospective data and do not explore the specific factors influencing actual enquirers.

Studies of enquirers

A wide-ranging review of home-based care by the Open Mind Research Group for the Victorian Department of Human Services during 2002 engaged current, past and prospective carers, including foster care enquirers recruited from the Homesharers data base of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. Two hundred enquirers (potential carers) – a response rate of 25% – indicated their preferences for caring and barriers to caring.[121]

Potential carers named the following reservations about proceeding with foster care:

- the impact of fostering on their own family
- not having enough say in the child's life
- work/family commitments
- the type of children in foster care.

Most enquirers preferred pre-school placements (69%), few opting for adolescent placements (19%) and 40% preferring not to care for special needs placements such as intellectually disabled or substance addictions. Moreover, the top three factors having an impact on the decision to proceed were:

- the level of support provided by agency and department
- dealing with access visits by birth parents
- being assured of having foster children who would not disrupt the household.[122]

In 2006 as part of the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS), the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare researched the characteristics of 1352 enquirers to its hotline.[123] Among other recommendations, the findings supported those above.

- the majority of enquirers were about caring for a child under 12 years old
- very few enquiries were received for ACP adolescent clients.[124]

Using a prospective approach and with data derived from the appropriate target market, these two studies advocated for a more systematic and professional approach to recruitment, recommending a targeted and effectively managed process across the recruitment to retention engagement process – recognising the particular marketing requirements at each stage.

Studies of enquirer segments

The above studies are unique in the insight derived from a prospective analysis of the influencing factors on the actual target market; that is, enquirers. However, all of the above studies consider barriers at the aggregate level and have not explored how these issues may influence intentions differently among target segments with different attitudes and psychological characteristics.

Four recent Australian studies (of the general population) stand out in providing insight into market segmentation of potential foster carers and the targeted strategy that must underlie social marketing and awareness raising efforts.

Research using an online panel survey with 1088 adults representative of the Australian population who were not current foster carers sought to identify the characteristics of those who had high potential to become foster parents by examining the relationships of a comprehensive set of constructs, including demographics; environmental and personal resources such as social support and emotional wellbeing; and personal characteristics such as self-directedness (hope and problem-solving), cooperativeness (e.g. empathy),

116 Bebbington & Miles, op.cit.

117 McHugh 2006, op. cit.

118 Degenhardt & Gostt, op. cit.

119 Ombudsman Victoria, op. cit.

120 Randle et al., 2012a, op. cit., p. 6.

121 Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2003, *Public Parenting: a review of home-based care in Victoria.* Melbourne: The Department of Human Services Victorian Government, pp. 91–92.

122 ibid.

123 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2007b, op. cit.

124 The ACP program has now been subsumed in the general foster care program. ACP clients were generally adolescents coming to placement for the first time.

and foster care interest, intention and information seeking.[125]

The study found that people who sought information (intention) about and expressed interest in foster caring (in both self-report and behaviour) were those who had higher social support from friends and significant others, were high in perspective-taking (cognitive) empathy and held trait hope and positive problem solving orientation.[126]

Recommendations for marketing communications seeking to motivate interest in foster caring included the following strategies:

- eliciting cognitive forms of empathy – promoting 'seeing' the perspective of the child rather than 'feeling' it
- the usefulness of friends as a source of support to foster parents
- targeting individuals with high trait hope who believe they are good at problem solving and achieving goals.[127]

Building on their earlier research, which evidenced heterogeneity in the barriers preventing different groups (segments) from fostering, Randle et al. (2012) [128] applied a posteriori segmentation analysis to a sample of 756 non-carer Australians recruited through a nationally representative online panel to explore the psychological constructs hypothesised to be associated with success in the role of carer. The aim was to explore the other side of the motivation question – the barriers to becoming a foster carer – and to identify segments in the community based on their propensity to, and probability of, being suitable for fostering. [129]

Four segments were revealed that were characterised by distinct combinations of socio-demographic and psychological barriers:

- 'mums and dads' – did not have psychological insecurities acting as barriers found in other segments but who were typically prevented from foster caring by time barriers and the responsibility of their own families
- 'not interested' – were concerned about emotional impacts of caring, such as returning the foster child to his/her birth family or not being able to return a child with whom they couldn't cope
- 'couldn't cope' – on average better educated, believed that they would not cope with the child and had no real interest in children
- 'never been asked' – significantly older, and with greater average personal wealth, this segment had one barrier – that no one had ever asked them or raised their awareness of foster care need.

Building on Carriochi et al. findings (above)[130], Randle et al. showed that it is the 'never been asked' segment that are characterised by greater hope and problem solving capacity and hence have the highest propensity to become foster carers.[131]

Randle et al. suggested that their findings indicate that generic social marketing campaigns aimed at the entire community will have limited effect alone and that customised strategies [will be] required to attract the particular types of carers most needed'.[132] Most critically, they recommended a carefully orchestrated combination of both mass and targeted marketing strategies.

Randle et al. recommended targeted marketing and communications to the 'mums and dads' and 'never been asked' segments. However, the mums and dads segment would seem to be one for whom the impact of broad-based social marketing on awareness and image of foster caring will also be critical. The 'mums and dads' may 'at some point in the future, when their children are older or have left home and this barrier no longer exists, be interested in foster caring'. In this case the barrier is 'stage of life' and positive marketing messages to encourage and maintain interest during less available stages of life may reap future benefits.[133]

Recommendations for the 'never been asked' segment were also centred on broad-based publicity communications. This segment was identified as the most promising for an immediate 'call to action' marketing campaign as this group do not feel limited by any psychological, stage of life or confidence barriers and may respond to education, an immediate and personal appeal for commitment and information about the difference they could make to a child's life.[134]

These studies show a link between a complex interaction of psychological and socio-demographic characteristics and the intent to foster, but are also unique in that they provide some insight into effective targeted and mass recruitment communication strategies.

125 Ciarrochi et al., op. cit.
126 ibid.
127 ibid, pp. 7–18.
128 Randle et al. 2012b, op. cit.
129 Randle et al. 2012a, op. cit.
130 Ciarrochi et al., op. cit.
131 Randle et al.l, 2012a, op. cit.
132 Randle et al., 2012b, op. cit.
133 Randle et al., 2012a, op. cit.
134 ibid.

The need for better targeted messaging is clear. Further similar research and discussion of the implications of this research for recruitment strategy will be a critical element of effective engagement strategy.

Targeted messages

While research indicates the need for targeted marketing, the question remains as to how much we understand about the relative impact of different messages for different target segments and what type of information must be communicated at the enquirer stage for different segments to support sound decision making at this point and cost-effective recruitment and accreditation processes.

The question is not just which messages will activate interest in foster caring but which messages will activate response from market segments who can potentially undertake the complex task of caring.

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare[135] considered evidence available about 'message' content and found that it is generally agreed that recruitment messages should:

- promote a positive image while honestly portraying foster care; messaging should be honest in explaining the demands on potential carers and their families to promote informed decision[136]
- present the rewards and satisfaction of being a foster carer
- present the positive outcomes for children and that there are children who need people who can help them[137]
- highlight the support that will be provided to carers.

In addition, it is recommended that messages will inform prospects of changing expectations of being a foster carer, such as dealing with complex demands and relationships between foster and birth families:

- expectation for resource families to work closely with the birth families as a mentor
- to support the reunification process through consistent and frequent visitation
- to help the child deal with flaws and inconsistences of their birth family.[138]

These recent studies add to this knowledge and suggest that:

- messages that convey the positive impacts of foster care on children – 'seeing' the perspective of the child (cognitive empathy) – will have more cut-through
- support messages should highlight the role of friends and family in foster caring
- rewards and satisfactions messages should leverage problem solving and goal achievement motivations of potential carers, and that messages about the complex demands and relationships can be positively portrayed from this perspective.

Few studies have attempted to systematically test communications messages. An empirical study by Randle and Dolnicar[139] tested two different advertisements using a positive and negative presentation, measuring on message take-out, intention to act and brand beliefs (confidence in foster care). While the transfer of information was not significantly different between the two advertisements, Randle and Dolnicar concluded that the positive advertisement was liked more by the sample and led to higher intention to act.

There is still much work to be done on the question of message content, tonality and cut-through for different target markets. Moreover, there is still much to be done in exploring the critical information messages necessary to ensure cost-effective recruitment and informed decision making at the point of enquiry.

Community development approaches

At debate in recruitment literature is the relative impact of broad-based recruitment strategies compared to the effectiveness of community-targeted approaches.

Community development approaches have been applied in both foster care program design and specifically to foster carer recruitment. Their role in effective recruitment strategy cannot be overlooked because they potentially support targeted recruitment strategy. Essentially, it is argued that recruitment will be most effective where it occurs at the local or community level, as it strikes where those most likely to respond can be identified and messages can be more easily tailored, and that community development approaches will be particularly successful to regional and localised recruitment efforts and for recruiting specific foster parents for specific segments of foster children,[140] for example, recurring for

135 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2007a, op. cit., p. 89.

136 McHugh & Valentine, op. cit., p. 59.

137 ibid., pp. 89–90.

138 Lutz, L. 2002, Recruitment and Retention of Resource Families: the promise and the paradox. Washington DC: Casey Family Programs.

139 Randle, M. & Dolnicar, S. 2010, The Use of Positive Versus Negative Appeals for Foster Care Advertisements. *Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy* Department of Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Canterbury: Christchurch.

140 Cox et al., op. cit.

CALD and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in need of OOHC.

Community development approaches have also been applied to the concept of widening social responsibility for supporting foster care placements. The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare examined the recruitment of resource families to support families who are foster carers. The Centre found that 'it harnesses the goodwill in the community towards volunteering despite changing time constraints in many families that have seen foster care recruitment decline steeply'.[141]

From a systems perspective, understanding the impact of community development approaches is a critical element of understanding effective recruitment in the Victorian context as, in Victoria, agencies that provide foster care are also involved in recruitment at some level in their 'local' communities.

However, the impact and effectiveness of community-based strategies is controversial. In addition to profiling enquirers, the review of home based care in 2003 by the Victorian Department of Human Services (through Open Mind Research) argued against highly localised efforts, suggesting that recruitment devolved to individual agency level resulted in highly variable effectiveness and commitment of resources. They advocated a higher level community-based approach at the regional level supplemented by more targeted recruitment at the local level.[142]

Recent analysis of enquirer responses to the Brighter Futures initiative under the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS) demonstrated significant variations in the conversion rate of enquiries to accredited foster carers depending on which CSO was working with the enquirer and in comparison to a centralised recruitment strategy. Evaluation of the success of the relevant sources of 'activation' resulted in the acknowledgement that 'on the whole, recruitment via [centralised] 'Foster a Brighter Future initiatives' [such as website and hotline] achieved a higher conversion (9%) rather than the direct activities of the CSO's (6.9%) [and] those referred through Foster a Brighter Future initiatives are 61% more likely to progress from attending a foster care information activity to becoming an accredited foster carer than those entering from other sources …'[143]

Cox et al.[144] studied the impact of source of awareness on foster caring outcomes. They found that 'in general, the method through which foster parents reported that they learned of the need for foster parents (mass media, word of mouth or local civic or church-based community recruitment) does not affect the type and length of foster family service[145], and awareness source did not predict the total number of types of special needs children fostered.[146]

In the USA there has been a move to offer a range of foster care models, such as the use of professionals as foster carers and private models of foster care in an attempt to widen the range of options and to meet the needs of children.[147] 'A number of private agencies have developed model foster care programs that offer expanded services, lower caseloads, and higher salaries for workers'[148]. A case in point is the Casey Program.

The Casey Program formulated an end-to-end recruitment process that utilised all resources available in both the public and private sphere. It advocated that recruitment is about community and that community service organisations (private providers) were therefore in the best position for local recruitment initiatives. [149]

Characteristics brought by community service organisations to recruitment in the USA are detailed knowledge about the profile and specific needs of children requiring care, development of local and regional recruitment plans based on this knowledge, partnership development approaches with local schools, community leaders, current foster parents and targeted local publicity and media. In Australia, the detailed knowledge about the numbers profile and specific needs of the children requiring care are not known to foster care providers, limiting the capacity for targeted and effective recruitment strategies. Policy and planning could be directed toward this end. Placement panel processes could be adapted to ensure that such information drives recruitment at a local area and funding directed for specific recruitment activity. However, these methods need to be applied systematically and rigorously evaluated. In particular, evidence must be provided to clarify the interaction and role of community development approaches along the foster carer engagement continuum – on activation versus enquiry versus conversion within the Victorian context.

141 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007a.

142 Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2003, op. cit.

143 Verso Consulting, op. cit., pp. 10, 24.

144 Cox et al., op. cit.

145 ibid., p. 170.

146 ibid., p. 166.

147 Tomison & Stanley 2001.

148 Kessler, R. C., Pecora, P. J., Williams, J. W., Hiripi, E., O'Brien, K., English, Det al. 2008, Effects of Enhanced Foster Care on the Long-term Physical and Mental Health of Foster Care Alumni. *Archive of General Psychiatry*, 65 (6).

149 Cox et al., op cit.

Considerations for social marketing to activate potential carers

While systematic research with enquirer and non-caring populations is providing insight, effective recruitment practice will require ongoing research to clarify how to customise the 'marketing approach' in order to produce the best outcomes – not just in terms of cost-effectiveness, but in terms of outcomes for the children in care:

- Further work is needed to clarify the structure of the market in terms of segments of immediate prospects and future prospective foster carers. In particular, true targeted marketing will require delineation of segments that can be readily identified 'a priori' within the community and specifically targeted with appropriate recruitment messages and marketing strategies.
- Further work is required to determine the specific roles and mix of general social marketing strategy, targeted market strategy, community-based approaches and the relevant communication messages for maximum cut-through and appropriate media channels of delivery (see below).
- Studies to date have identified segments of potential foster carers but do not identify recruitment strategies aimed at obtaining foster carers for specific segments of children – such as for children with special needs. These two elements of target marketing are often confused in the literature. The potential foster carer segments and the communications messages and strategies to achieve this have not been properly identified or discussed. The role of US-based research is interesting but the application of child-specific marketing practices in the Victorian context will require considerable further discussion.
- Communications testing research is sorely needed – determining which messages have the most impact for which target market and what point in the engagement process.
- Most critically, future research must examine the link between foster care intention, information seeking and behavioural commitment to becoming a foster carer. It would seem that there are critical segments based on different psychodynamics and motivations with different potential to be foster carers. It will also be critical to ask the meaning of these underlying motivations for applicability to undertake the task of foster caring and the types of information and support needed to achieve continuance through to accreditation and commitment to foster caring.

Enquiry

As noted above, it is important for effective recruitment strategy to specifically understand the factors that promote call to action as opposed to conversion to action. That is, what factors activate interest versus what promotes enquiry and information seeking behaviour? When separated from the process of activation, there would seem to be very little systematic research on the factors that influence converting to action – moving from aware public to foster carer prospect.

Repeated messages

It is clear from research that call to action requires consistent and repeated messaging through multiple media. The average 'public' requires up to three stimuli to make a cognitive response. Potential foster carers do not react to a single stimulus[150] and would need to be exposed to foster care messages at least three times before they would take action.[151, 152, 153] Research with enquirers by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare has consistently shown that the majority of enquirers report that their interest derived from a number of sources and multiple exposure to messages about foster caring.[154, 155] This consistent evidence is critically important for recruitment strategy.

Barriers and motivations to enquiry

Information channels

People who are interested in being foster carers tend to seek out information first before making an enquiry. However, some research has shown that accessing information may be a significant barrier to moving from activation to enquiry. Many do not know where to find information about foster care.[156, 157]

For those who do access information, the top three information sources have emerged to be the Internet or Facebook, word of mouth and newspaper advertising.[158]

150 D. B. Palmer, 'Comparing home-finding methods', *Adoption and Fostering*, vol. 5, 1981, pp. 41–43, cited in Bebbington & Miles, op. cit., p. 299.

151 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2007b, op. cit., p. xv.

152 Moore, B., Grandpre, M. & Sccroll, B. 1998, Foster home recruitment: A market research approach to attracting and licensing applicants. Child Welfare, 67, 147–169 as cited in Cox et al., op. cit.

153 Cox et al., op. cit.

154 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2007b, op. cit.

155 Verso Consulting, op. cit.

156 Randle et al. 2012a, op. cit., p. 11.

157 South Australian Department of Family and Community Services, 'Fostering: The future', South Australian Department of Family and Community Services, Adelaide, 1997, cited in Bromfield et al., op. cit., p. 8.

158 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2012b, op. cit., pp. 20–21.

Information via the Internet has increased at exponential rates. The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, as part of the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS), reported that, in 2006, 27% of foster care enquiries came from the Internet and 24% came from local papers; by 2009, 45.9% of enquirers had heard about foster care via the Internet, by 2010 it was 52.8% and by 2011 it was 59.6%.[159]

However, research is needed to comprehensively explore the way potential enquirers interact with these channels of enquiry and the specific messages, information needs and other marketing elements that will attract those with potential to become foster carers and positively influence going on to enquire.[160]

Of particular interest is the interaction between Internet as a source of information and enquiry and Internet as an awareness source. The 2012 Verso evaluation of the FCCRS[161] reported that as the number of enquiries via the Internet rose, so responses from local publicity, the telephone hotline, from agencies and from regional publicity and recruitment strategies steadily declined. This is consistent evidence of the increasing role of the Internet in recruitment methodology but has also highlighted a need for clearer thinking around the use of the Internet as a source of awareness (activation), information (activation and information seeking) and enquiry (call to action).

Word of mouth

Word of mouth in particular is cited internationally and nationally as a powerful and effective medium in recruitment and enquiry.[162, 163, 164] Trained foster carers have been claimed to be very effective in the recruitment process.[165, 166, 167, 168] Word of mouth is reported by enquirers as the second most common channel through which message delivery about foster caring is received.[169] However, this is an area of potential impact that requires systematisation, coordination and the application of rigorous research and marketing methodology to capture and direct it more effectively.

The point at which word of mouth has most impact in the process of recruitment is not clear. In general, it would seem to be advocated at the point of enquiry. It is argued that personal contact with carers and their foster children or a personal experience in understanding the need for carers may be the strongest factor in overcoming reservations potential carers may have.[170] As word of mouth recruitment initiatives most often occur at the community level – at agency level – claims about the effectiveness of this approach are largely anecdotal.

On the other hand, negative word of mouth can also affect recruitment, particularly when this method is used without systematic thought to its structure or application. Negative anecdotes largely derive from agency-based applications of word of mouth methods that have not been well managed and systematically applied.[171]

Cox et al.[172] applied some systematic research. Their research 'debunked some practice wisdom' around word of mouth effectiveness. Their research did not support the practice wisdom and past research that had suggested that 'mass media generates more fostering enquiries; whereas, word-of-mouth recruitment by other foster parents is more efficient in producing licensed [accredited] foster families'.[173]

Agency response

Research has shown that poor agency response can cause problems in the recruitment process.[174, 175] Markenco highlighted that enquirers go through a considerable amount of conversation with their family prior to making an enquiry and therefore may have a certain level of expectation when taking the first step to make an enquiry.[176] Agency responsiveness is therefore critical to call to action. The role of the agency as first responder must be personal, positive and professional.

The impact of agencies as marketers whose messages and responsiveness influence call to action and their impact as customer service providers at enquiry is confused in the literature. This perhaps reflects the

159 Verso Consulting, op. cit.
160 Randle et al. 2012, op. cit.
161 Verso Consulting, op. cit.
162 M. Marcenko, K. Brennan & S. Lyons, *Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention: Developing Resource Families for Washington State's Children in Care,* Partners For Our Children, 2009, p. 4, cited in Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2012b, op. cit., p. 23.
163 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2007a, op. cit., p. 68.
164 McHugh et al., *The Availability of Foster Carers: Main Report,* NSW Department of Community Services, Sydney, 2004, cited in Bromfield et al., loc. cit., p. 8.
165 ibid., p. 91.
166 McHugh & Valentine, op. cit., p. 59.
167 Bebbington & Miles, loc. cit.
168 Frederico et al., op. cit., p. 86.
169 Verso Consulting, op. cit.
170 McHugh et al., *The Availability of Foster Carers: Main Report*, NSW Department of Community Services, Sydney, 2004, cited in Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2007a, loc. cit.
171 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007b, op. cit. pp. IX–X.
172 Cox et al. op. cit.
173 Cox et al. op cit. p169
174 Marcenko et al. cited in Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2012b, op. cit., p. 10.
175 Verso Consulting, op. cit.
176 ibid., p. 25.

varying roles of different agencies within the Victorian foster carer landscape and is a pertinent example of the inter-relatedness between foster care program design and marketing/recruitment strategy on foster carer supply.

Viewing the recruitment of foster carers as an engagement process enables more thought into the 'enquiry' point. What evidence is available would suggest that at this stage in the process the marketing approach required is a customer acquisition and conversion strategy. It is no longer about social marketing and promotion but about potential customer experience and responsiveness. Viewed from this perspective, it is clear that there are a number of unanswered questions:

- to what extent will a customer responsive system require a coordinated value proposition and experience, such as a central, professional and monitored website as opposed to agency-based websites that compete for customer attention?
- on the other hand, to what extent will customer responsiveness require a 'tailored' response based on locality and customer characteristics – and what does this mean for referral of enquirers to different agencies and agency responsiveness?

Systems-designed mixed methods

The consensus of evidence would suggest that the most effective recruitment strategy will utilise a mixed-methods approach to raise awareness, incite call to action and promote conversion.[177]

It would seem that the consensus of research to date has shown that both broad-based media strategies and localised promotion are believed to combine to be effective in increasing public awareness and creating an initial interest to foster.[178, 179] There is evidence that a planned and graduated advertising/public education approach may be the way to achieve the best results.[180] Consistency of message is key. A combined approach with clear, relevant, consistent messages that speak to benefits and which use appropriate channels (media) of delivery for defined target markets is critical to success. Additionally, messages that are positive but truthful about the challenges of foster caring are critical.

177 Cox et al., op. cit. p. 169.

178 Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2003, op. cit.

179 South Australian Department of Family and Community Services, 'Fostering: The future', South Australian Department of Family and Community Services, Adelaide, 1997, cited in Bromfield et al., op. cit., p. 8.

180 ibid., p. 68.

Systems approach – mixed methods versus ad hoc approaches

It is important, however, to note that the evidence would clearly suggest that mixed methods are not the same as 'ad hoc'.

Verso Consulting for the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare noted that ad hoc agency approaches to recruitment do not work and are in fact a waste of funds.[181] The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, reviewing the evidence of research and recruitment methodologies, has consistently advocated that there is a need for better coordination and cooperation within the sector to develop targeted recruitment strategies.[182]

The results of the Cox et al. investigation into the impact of awareness sources suggest that mixed methods are critical to stimulating enquiry at the levels needed to meet demand. While they advocate that more should be made of local community channels, such as civic and religious organisations, for the calibre of foster carer recruitment via those methods, they also point out that these organisations were the awareness source for only 9% of the sample studied and would influence only a very small proportion of the general public. Moreover, 24% of the sample cited multiple channels of awareness before making enquiry. Clearly, higher enquiry rates require more broad-based and combined marketing strategies.[183]

Reviewing the evidence to 2001, Cox et al.[184] recommended:

- using a variety of recruitment approaches that allow for an accumulation of knowledge from different sources over a period of time before enquiry is triggered
- more effective use of civic organisations and community development and community engagement in recruitment activities emphasising the 'give to children' approach
- more effective use of religious and civic organisations in recruitment activities
- ensuring mass media approaches – for both local and to reach rural populations
- targeting those who have experience of special needs in recruitment campaigns.

181 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007b, op. cit., p. xv.

182 ibid. p. xi.

183 Cox et al., op. cit. p. 161.

184 Cox et al., op. cit.

The Casey Family Services evaluation of the Casey Program[185], noted above, concluded that:

- recruitment messages, orientation and training must reflect new roles and must be accessible
- recruitment in today's environment requires structured partnerships with not-for profit providers
- retention is recruitment – public programs must support existing resource families.

In addition to other recommendations, the Open Mind Research for DHS[186] described above recommended:

- regional recruitment strategies that are supplemented by more targeted recruitment at the local level by individual agencies – recruitment devolved to individual agency level resulted, they said, in highly variable approaches in terms of effectiveness and commitment of resources
- special campaigns targeted at recruiting Indigenous carers
- increased reimbursement linked to training and complexity of the child placed.[187]

These recommendations recognise that a systematic approach is required which works cohesively to build a consistent message across multiple channels and is supplemented by targeted messages at segments that will respond to special or immediate needs.

To achieve this, systematic, prospective research with enquirers, at different points in the foster carer engagement process, is critical to examine the effects of recruitment methods, channels and messages at different points in the recruitment process and engagement life cycle.[188]

A case study: the Foster a Brighter Future FCCRS strategy

The Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS) was a cohesive mixed-methods strategy based on a coherent and repeated central message delivery – 'Foster carers come from all walks of life'. This message had been previously found to effective tonality and cut-through, to promulgate a positive image and to provide information arresting misconceptions about the characteristics of who could be a foster carer.

This message was supported by direct marketing (poster and DM) initiatives, coherent website design and specific targeted strategies such as 'Rainbow Hair for Foster Care'. The Rainbow Hair for Foster Care recruitment campaign was coordinated annually as part of the FCCRS and combined features of a community development approach with targeted mass marketing in that local providers undertook these activities in association with state-wide publicity and awareness raising. The 'Rainbow Hair' campaign sat alongside a centralised and customer friendly website (Foster a Brighter Future website) that leveraged growth in Internet usage, supported consistent messages and provided easy and customer friendly access to information and enquiry.

The FCCRS was in itself a relatively small investment of funds in a collaborative and coordinated strategy – a once-off commitment of $500,000 was utilised over a six-year period to support all staffing, agency engagement, enquiry response functions and publicity and communications strategy and implementation, including the printing and provision of marketing collateral.

However, the FCCRS, using a coordinated mixed-methods and targeted message methodology resulted in strong growth in enquiries, improved conversion rates and a significant widening of the potential pool from which carers could be sourced.

Verso Consulting analysed time series data of enquirers from 2009–2011 for the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. They found that enquiries rose steadily throughout the FCCRS; enquiries rose from 1565 in 2009 to 1615 in 2011.[189] At its inception in 2006, conversion rates of foster care applicants in Victoria were found to be low – 6%. By 2011, conversion rates of 9% were the worst-case scenario – a marked improvement. Most critically, the FCCRS was based on a central message directed at community misconceptions about who was eligible to be a foster carer, and targeted placement of this consistent message resulted in significant increase in enquiry from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, single people and young people aged 18–24 years.[190]

Conversion and retention

A consistent trend found globally and within Australia is the low conversion rate of enquirer to accredited carer, most commonly less than 10%.[191, 192] Studies of the barriers to conversion have predominantly concentrated

185 ibid.
186 Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2003, op. cit.
187 ibid., p. 128.
188 Tomison & Stanley, op cit.
189 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007b, op. cit.
190 Verso Consulting, op. cit.
191 McHugh & Valentine, op. cit., p. 4.
192 Bromfield et al., op. cit.

on the study of foster carers, in particular those who have, or who have considered, stopping caring roles.

Studies of lapsed foster carers

The Victorian Government research through Open Mind reflects the findings of research in this area. Two hundred and fifty current and past caregivers were surveyed around their profile of caring, satisfaction with caring and future intention in relation to caring. Only 10% of current carers thought they would be leaving fostering within the next two years. Conjoint analysis of factors contributing to satisfaction and retention in the carer system found that, while perceived negative impacts on their own family and changes in circumstances such as going back to work influenced stopping being a foster carer, two critical systems issues were of particular impact: reimbursement and recognition, and involvement and level of support.[193]

The factors most critical to continuation in a carer role are consistently found to be the level of support (in Victoria, primarily by DHS workers) and communication (with caseworkers and agency), and level of recognition including input into decisions and assessment of and information about the child and honesty about a child's need.

Most interestingly, lack of collaborative input and not having a voice in decisions are a constant theme in literature looking at reasons for leaving foster caring.[194, 195 196, 197, 198]

Studies of new foster carers and enquirers

Studies have shown that many carers leave within a year after accreditation.[199] Information on why new foster carers and prospective foster carers specifically chose to leave is not readily available, however, it is known that the support package given to potential foster carers is also crucial in determining whether they decide to foster or not.[200] New carers tend to be anxious before their first placement and those who are not contacted during this period of time may feel forgotten.[201] New carers may also be naive about and unprepared for the actual demands of foster care until they experience it for themselves.[202] It is suggested that conversion and minimisation of 'dropout' might be effected by introducing mentoring of new carers, especially by current carers as a valuable form of additional support for them.[203]

Studies emphasising the need to improve the foster care support system are numerous. From the perspective of recruitment, recruitment and retention strategies will have limited effect if the current support system is not well developed.[204 205] Similarly, the difficulties in recruiting and retaining carers have served to highlight the necessity of providing carers with a range of support services.

Most critically, however, while this evidence gives some insight into the factors that might well influence decisions to proceed from enquiry to accreditation, this is not sufficient for effective recruitment methodology. Studies of enquirers who choose not to proceed at different stages of the enquiry to accreditation process are necessary to explore the influences on their decision and barriers to proceeding at each decision point.

Studies of process barriers: information, training, assessment process

What evidence is available has suggested that during the assessment and training period, some applicants may drop out for the following reasons: assessment process is too lengthy, invasive and lacks transparency; agency's relationship with potential carer is not established and maintained during the lengthy process until placement,[206] fear of meeting child's parents and negotiating access arrangements[207]; and changes to personal circumstances.[208]

In one study, the main reasons for dropping out were: no follow-up by agency (25%), lack of available placements (20%) and personal circumstances (51%).[209] It has been suggested that conversion rates could be heightened if agencies are prompt in responding to the enquirer (ideally within 24 hours), show enthusiasm and encouragement, and give the right type and level of information. However, this research does not provide more specific understanding of the elements of customer

193 Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2003, op. cit.
194 ibid.
195 Piescher et al., op. cit.
196 Pell, op. cit.
197 Department of Health and Human Services (Tas). op. cit.
198 Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2007, *Family and Placement Services Sector Development Plan Background paper 4: Foster caregiver survey*. Melbourne: Victorian Government Department of Human Services.
199 McHugh & Valentine, op. cit., pp. 4–5.
200 ibid., p. 94.
201 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007a, op. cit., p. 47.
202 Kirton, D. 2001, Love and Money: Payment, Motivation and the Fostering Task. *Child and Family Social Work*, 6, 199–208.
203 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007a, loc. cit.
204 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007b, op. cit., p. xiii.
205 Bromfield et al., op. cit., p. 10.
206 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007b, op. cit., p. xiv.
207 Quantum Research op. cit. cited in Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007a, op. cit., p. 80.
208 ibid., pp. 86–87.
209 Bromfield et al., op. cit., p. 9.

service that would have the most impact on conversion rates.[210, 211]

Other research has pointed to the length of time taken for the accreditation process. Proper assessment and training of potential foster carers is necessary to prepare them for their upcoming role[212] and to screen out unsuitable candidates early on to save time and reduce placement instability down the road.[213] However, it has been suggested that the assessment process should still be streamlined where possible[214], and enquirers should be informed about the reasons for and prepared for the fairly lengthy and rigorous assessment process[215] as a means toward increasing accreditation rates. There is also variation in the accreditation time frame between agencies that can be further improved to achieve better consistency.[216]

Clearly, while many systems issues are thought to affect conversion rates, prospective studies of enquirers as they progress through the foster care engagement process are critical to recruitment strategy and systems design and conversion. Again, reliance on retrospective recall does little to contribute to a real understanding of the factors that influence actual decision making.

Payments schemes

Financial arrangements are likely to be an issue for newer carers, mainly because they want to be reassured against loss of money due to the financial demands of their decision to foster care.[217] The relationship between the demand for foster care and the supply of placements has received considerable attention. [218, 219, 220]

Levels of payments (known in Australia as reimbursements) have been identified as a barrier for people entering or continuing as foster carers. In a 2002 report prepared for the Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia, the Australian Foster Care Association and the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies, McHugh examined the adequacy of payments in various jurisdictions against Budget standards.[221] This work, and further studies in 2008 and in 2011[222, 223] evidenced the role of reimbursement levels on decisions to proceed. However, only 6% of lapsed carers in the Open Mind study identified inadequate reimbursements as having an effect on their decision to discontinue fostering[224] and it was found that only small levels of increases in reimbursement would be required to improve satisfaction.[225]

In a study released in 2007 but undertaken with data from the American Cooperative information System Survey between 1987 and 1990, Doyle and Peters examined the impact of a basic monthly subsidy with the number of children in family foster care per 1000 children in each state as a proxy for the quantity of foster care services. The model developed by Doyle and Peters used population-based data to identify risk factors and characteristics that account for demand and several opportunity cost measures that account for supply. As kinship care was a growing form of care during this time, the researchers used several measures to account for the impact of payments in the kinship care sector. They concluded that 'states may be able to use economic incentives to clear the market – attract foster parents in order to remedy what has been labelled a foster parent shortage …'[226] However, they found that this may not hold true at the highest levels of payment and is more likely to hold true in states with high risk factors for children requiring care.

It would seem that foster care reimbursement is a lever that could influence conversion and retention. However, further research is required to understand the relative importance of this in decision making under different and improved systems support design models and with different segments of foster carers.

Private and professional models of foster care

Alongside the question of reimbursement, the issue of whether foster care should be considered a profession or whether it should remain as a voluntary activity has generated more interest in recent decades.[227] Advocates argue that it is one of the best ways to address the challenges of recruitment and retention.[228]

210 Quantum Research op. cit. cited in Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007a, op. cit., p. 79.
211 Lakin, *Retaining Recruited Resource Families*, National Resource Centre for Special Needs Adoption, 2003, cited in Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007a, op. cit.
212 McHugh & Valentine, op. cit., p. 60.
213 UK Department for Education and Skills, *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care*, presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills by Command of Her Majesty, 2006, cited in Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2007a, op. cit., p. 80.
214 Ombudsman Victoria, loc. cit.
215 McHugh & Valentine, op. cit., p. 59.
216 ibid.
217 ibid.
218 Campbell & Downs, op. cit.
219 Chamberlain, P., Moreland, S. & Reid, K. 1992, Enhanced Services and Stipends for Foster Parents: Effects on Retention Rates and Outcomes for Children. *Child Welfare,* LXXI (5), 387–404.
220 Mc Hugh et al. 2004, op. cit.
221 McHugh 2002, op. cit.
222 McHugh & Valentine 2010, op. cit.
223 ibid.
224 ibid.
225 ibid.
226 Doyle & Peters, op. cit., p. 19.
227 Kirton, op. cit., p. 199.
228 McHugh & Valentine, op. cit., p. 61.

The Casey Program in the USA is an example of the use of professionals as foster carers and of a private model of foster care.[229] 'A number of private agencies have developed model foster care programs that offer expanded services, lower caseloads, and higher salaries for workers …'[230] Evaluations of these models in the USA have shown significant positive impacts on mental health, physical health and stability. However, it is not clear whether the outcomes achieved were a result of the professional model or the increased levels of placement stability achieved. Moreover, the most critical difference between the private Casey Program and public models was the cost required to achieve these outcomes – 60% higher cost per child.[231, 232, 233]

Australian evidence from South Australia is not encouraging. In South Australia, the tender for foster care was outsourced to a non-government sector, church-based agency through competitive tender. Qualitative research with 16 focus groups of users and providers found '… near universal agreement that the quality of the service system had declined and that working relationships within the sector had deteriorated'.[234]

Resourcing of foster care, and in particular, reimbursements of foster carers, their training and professionalism are all critical questions to models of care into the future. However, it would seem that 'privatisation' is not an answer in itself.[235] Private provision will require considerable cost input to leverage results and will still require the establishment of a comprehensive marketing strategy coordinated with the foster care program, out-of-home care systems support, and wider sector systems planning such as transitioning for care planning. These elements are not currently a feature of foster care in Victoria.

End-to-end recruitment program design

The challenge is to provide better services to children in need of foster care and better support to foster carers in an integrated and cost-effective whole system.[236] In order to achieve this, recruitment must be seen to be a process that is, in itself, part of a process of care and protection.

229 Tomison & Stanley, op. cit.

230 Kessler et al., op. cit.

231 ibid.

232 Nemeroff, C. B. 2008, Fostering Foster Care Outcomes: Commentary. Archives of General Psychiatry, 65 (6), 623–624.

233 Tomison and Stanley, op. cit.

234 Barber, J. G. 2001, The slow demise of foster care in South Australia. Journal of Social Policy, 30 (1), 1–15.

235 McHugh 2008, op. cit., p. 76.

236 Tomison & Stanley, op. cit.

The evidence available would suggest that a cohesive end-to-end approach is required that identifies best practice in marketing strategy at each point in the engagement process and which combines overall, targeted and locally relevant and specific marketing with customer service and retention processes.

While an example of a private foster care system, in 2005 Casey Family Programs of Seattle in the USA engaged in an action research method called the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) to identify the critical elements of overcoming service barriers and achieving systems change in recruitment and retention of carers. This iterative approach to systems reform confirmed that congruence of reform across a system is achieved through the establishment of a standard comprehensive framework that functions across the whole process from public awareness to accreditation.

It is informative to review the findings of this project with regard to the issues raised by this review of the evidence around foster care recruitment in Victoria.

The project activity was undertaken, outcomes reported and recommendations made in three key thematic areas:

- recruitment
- retention
- voice of constituents.

Carer or potential carers were identified as resource families. This is a potent linguistic vehicle for changing the dynamics of problem definition around the demand and supply issue in foster care that is consistent with the intended outcomes of systems reform as proposed herein. Twenty-six child and family services agencies from around the USA participating in the reform process were required to 'work simultaneously in all component areas to ensure system-wide impacts'.

Eight key components of an ideal system for recruiting and retaining resource families were identified. The eight components reflect the evidence of literature in the Australian context as detailed in this review and were as follows:

1. Messaging: public awareness is raised about the need of children in the public child welfare system, both generally and child specifically.
   - General awareness of child welfare and foster care and adoption is raised and addresses public perceptions, myths and misperceptions.
   - Recruitment is strategic and targeted based on the *needs of the children in care,* including racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious/spiritual diversity,

and representing the communities from which children come.

  - Recruitment messages are targeted to multiple communities simultaneously and use the community's language and cultural beliefs as a way of engaging them.

2. Engaging resource families (carers) during the recruitment process: carer families are supported during the recruitment process, improving the likelihood that those families who express interest in becoming carer families will make a commitment to the process.

  - Families who express an interest in becoming resource families receive an immediate response to their enquiries in ways that are culturally appropriate and in the language of their choice.
  - The needs of children requiring placement and their families are presented accurately.
  - The types and availability of services for children and carer families are presented accurately.
  - Decision-making about which families should be engaged and for which children they are appropriate is clear, timely and includes participation from the carer families.
  - Responsibilities of, expectations for and rights of resource families are clear.
  - Responsibilities of, expectations for and rights of the agency are clear.

3. Supporting families and children through the process and preparing them for placement.

  - Communication with carer families is cordial, respectful and direct.
  - Resource families receive support to complete all activities that are required as part of the process.
  - Carer families are prepared to become resources to children and their families through various modalities and by various people.
  - Preparation varies by type of carer family, type of children, geography and culture.
  - All relevant information (i.e. children's backgrounds, agency procedures, legal requirements) is shared openly with prospective carer families and on an ongoing basis.

4. Licensing: qualified resource families are licensed in a timely and supportive way.

5. Providing services and supports for carer families is a critical and specific programmatic support.

6. Developing relationships and supporting involvement with the agency across the child's full support network.

  - Carer families, youth and birth families must be true partners with the agency.

7. Involving the community.

  - The community must be an active partner in recruiting and supporting carer families, youth in care and their families.

8. Staffing: appropriate and well-trained staff who can engage carer families, youth and children's families.

Conclusion – more than a simple marketing approach

Ensuring adequate numbers of foster carers to meet demand is a complex problem. Much is known about recruitment strategy. Much remains unknown. Much is imprecise and muddied through confusion of the issues of foster care program design with recruitment strategy.

One of the latest trends in customer satisfaction and marketing, Customer Value Analysis emerged from work in the areas of economics, business strategy, customer satisfaction and quality toward the end of the 1980s. Economist Bradley T. Gale, along with Prof. Robert Buzzell, published The PIMS Principles, a cross-sectional and longitudinal study of business units in the Profit Impact of Marketing Strategy (PIMS) database[237]. Their key conclusion was an identified need to understand customers' perceptions of the value of the goods and services they obtain. Value, it is claimed, is measured by ascertaining customer perceptions of brand, product, price and service relative to competitor offers. Marketing, communications, customer service, pricing and brand image are all strategically aligned in an overall value proposition to the market based on perceptions of these four areas and the understanding this brings as to how they interact.

Foster carers are more than purchasers of commodities. They are committed and caring people with altruistic, empathetic and complex motivations. However, there is much to be learned from a more sophisticated marketing methodology, not the least of which is the need to carefully and systematically identify the elements of the marketing mix, the target audience for each and the set of marketing levers and channels of delivery pertinent at each point in the customer experience.

237 http://www.cval.com

Calls for a marketing approach to recruitment have shown insight but more work is critical. The challenges faced by providers of foster care are similar to the marketing challenges faced by commercial organisations. They need to identify the right consumers (individuals likely to be good foster carers), design marketing campaigns to attract them (reach the target audience) and motivate them to begin fostering and keep them loyal to the agency (retention) for as long as possible.[238] Further research is required to elucidate and delineate the elements of the marketing mix, the target audience, the channel of delivery and the targeted messages of most impact along the process of moving from public to foster carer. It requires 'market research' and target audience identification and understanding in its truest sense – an understanding of those people who currently do not foster a child, the identification of those who have potential to do so and the development of effective marketing strategies and communication channels to overcome barriers and attract more carers.[239]

Most critically, it must be recognised that a marketing strategy is not just about publicity and communications. Current marketing strategy requires thinking across the process of customer engagement and views the process from customer acquisition to customer service to customer retention. Engagement methodology allows understanding of the process through clear identification of the target audience and potential strategies at each stage (and their interaction).

Foster care is not a product to sell – it is a critical social reasonability inherent to our functioning as a society offering equality of human rights. However, a full engagement methodology applied to the foster care supply-demand question will further understanding of foster care and its unique place in our society and will promote a more systematic, cost-effective and successful approach to foster carer acquisition, retention and support and improved outcomes for those children placed in their care.

238 Randle et al. 2012a, op. cit., p. 7.
239 Randle et al. 2012b, op. cit., p. 391.

Chapter 4: Research methodology

The research questions

This research was based on an online survey of 370 respondents who had enquired to become foster carers through the Foster a Brighter Futures website or the Foster Care Hotline between June 2010 and June 2012. At the time of being contacted for participation, respondents could have been at any stage in the process of enquiry to accreditation. Having once enquired, an enquirer would remain on the 'enquirer list' and would be a potential respondent to the survey regardless of whether he/she did or did not proceed along the process of accreditation and regardless of where they were currently placed in the process.

The research offered the opportunity to explore the following research questions:

1. What is the current profile of potential foster care enquirers? In particular, what was the impact of the FCCRS on stimulating interest from a broader range of members of the community?
2. Are there discernible delay or dropout points in the journey from enquiry to conversion and how can they be leveraged to increase conversion rates?
3. What are the barriers against and motivators toward progressing from enquiry through consecutive stages of the engagement process?
4. What are the channels of impact for awareness, information and enquiry? In particular, what is the role of the Internet in awareness, information and enquiry?
5. What are the systems, communications and engagement learnings that will facilitate recruitment and marketing strategy to both attract and potentially convert segments of the population with potential to be carers into foster carer prospects and into new foster carers?

The research design

An online questionnaire, designed to explore responses at every stage in the engagement journey, was sent to 1162 enquirers with functioning email addresses who had enquired through the hotline or website (Appendix 2.) The questionnaire was designed to enable 'skipping' to relevant questions for each respondent in accordance with the response to a preceding question. On average, the survey could be completed within 8–10 minutes. Three hundred and seventy (370) enquirers responded to the survey by completing at least 60% of the questions in the set of the questions applicable to them – a response rate of 32%.

The findings of this data set reflect many of the trends noted in the analysis of the full enquirer demographics for 2011[240], indicating that this sample is well representative of the total enquirer pool to the Foster a Brighter Futures website and hotline (see Appendix 4). Any differences noted are discussed below as they impact ongoing strategy.

In most cases, proportions within the sample are presented herein for consideration. Where available, these proportions have been compared with previous data. Where statistical significance is discussed for comparing within sample segment responses, statistical significance has been calculated using chi-square statistical analysis at $p = 0.05$ using one- or two-tailed analysis as appropriate.

Ethical considerations

All enquirers who were sent the survey had indicated willingness to be contacted about the FCCRS service when making their enquiry. A full explanation of survey intent, details of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, confidentiality and anonymity and process consent details were provided on entering the online survey. Consent was confirmed in Question 1 of the survey by the respondent specifically selecting to go on with the questionnaire. Process consent was enabled by allowing the respondent to choose to exit the survey at any point. All respondents were asked to indicate willingness for re-contact at the conclusion of their response. All responses were anonymous and only group data has been retained, analysed and reported. Full details of the ethical processes underpinning this survey are detailed in Appendix 3.

240 Verso Consulting 2012.

Chapter 5: Profiling foster care enquirers

Characteristics of enquirers

Gender and age range of enquirers

Gender

The demographic profile of enquirers who responded to this study is displayed in Table 4.

By far the majority of respondents to this survey were female (87.3%). As responders were those whose email addresses were placed on the enquiry form, it can therefore be assumed that by far the majority of enquiry instigators are female. Male enquirers were only 12.7%. Of those, 36.4% were from same-sex couples.

For heterosexual couples, the instigator of the enquiry process is almost exclusively female. This would suggest that, with the exception of same-sex males and single males, the enquiry response process will most often be responding to a female enquirer.

Age

Foster care enquirers come from a wide range of ages. The majority of foster care enquirers in this sample were aged 30–44 years (59.6%). However, half of enquirers (53.8%) were less than 40 years of age and 26.8% were over 45 years of age. This is displayed in Figure 8.

The full analysis of the FCCRS data from 2009–11 by Verso evidenced a steady increase in young enquirers over the period of the FCCRS from 2008–2011. Enquirers under 35 years rose from 24.1% in 2008 to 35.7% in 2011.[241]

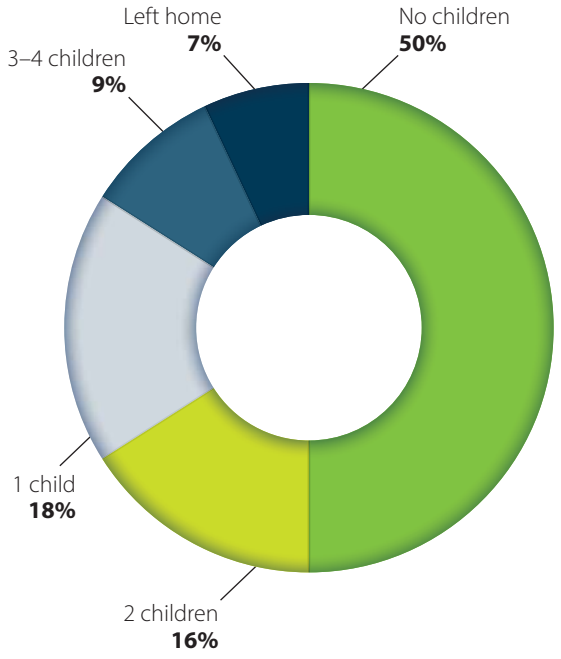
In this sample of enquirers, taken across 2010–2012, 32.5% were under 35 years of age, indicating a continual steady increase in the level of enquiry from this younger segment with no marked shift in recent years. In addition, enquiries from very young enquirers (under 30 years) were higher than expected (13.5%) and at a similar proportion to the over 50-year-old enquirers (15.3%).

- An increase in the proportion of enquirers under 40 years was a stated goal of the FCRRS strategy.[242] Taken together with the 2011 Verso evaluation analysis, this data would suggest a critical impact on younger people from the FCCRS marketing strategy.
- However, further testing of messages to this segment and the types of support required to convert them should be an element of ongoing recruitment strategy for young foster carers.

This sample of enquirers did not reflect the findings of the Verso analysis where applications from under 25-year-olds were reported to have significantly increased to 11% of enquirers.[243] In this sample, 4.9% of enquirers were under 25 years of age.

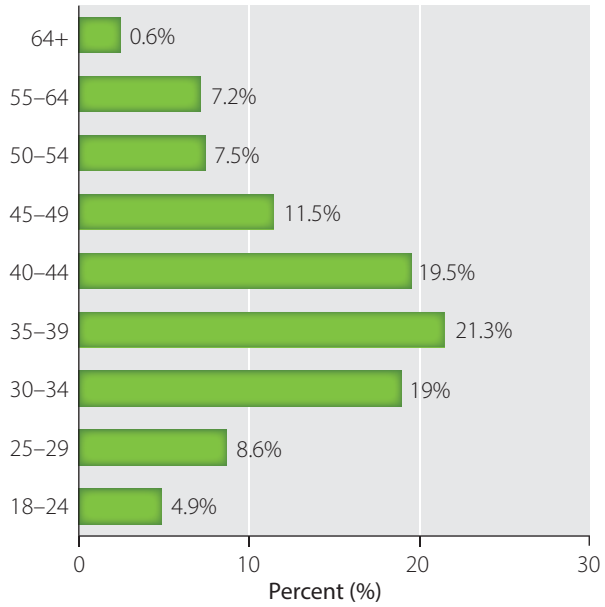
- The smaller evidenced proportion of very young potential carers should be further investigated. This sample contains enquirers at all stages of the process from enquiry to accreditation. The Verso analysis of the full 2011 data set analysed the profile of respondents at the time of enquiry. It can therefore be hypothesised that very young enquirers do not proceed very far past the point of enquiry. This warrants further consideration both in terms of recruitment and policy.

Figure 7: Number of children



241 Verso Consulting, op. cit. p 27.
242 Wilks & Wise, op. cit.
243 ibid.

Figure 8: Age range of foster care enquirers



(n = 348)

Household structure

Experience with own children

Only 1 in 2 of those who had enquired to be foster carers had personal experience of their own children – 50% of all enquirers did not have children of their own, other than foster children (see Figure 7).

- This is a critical finding when considering the types of information and support that carers with no other experience of children might need in order to convert from enquirers to foster carers and in order to retain these carers.

Marital and household arrangements

The majority of those enquiring to become foster carers are married (53.5%) or in same-sex partnered relationships (11.3%) and live with a spouse or with spouse and children (60.1%). However, 1 in 3 enquirers are unpartnered – divorced, widowed or single – (34.6%) (see Table 4).

Given this proportion of unpartnered enquirers, 1 in 5 of those who enquire live on their own (22.3%) and another 15.5% live in a shared arrangement either with their children (7.2%), other family (4%) or non-family (4.3%). A segmentation analysis based on this data is presented in table 4.

Gender differences

Female enquirers

Gender differences in enquirer profile is displayed in Table 4. Being the dominant enquirer type, characteristics of female enquirers reflected the total enquirer sample. Given this, interestingly, female foster care enquirers are as likely to be childless as they are to have their own children – 46.7% of female enquirers have no children; of those with children, 45.4% have children at home and 7.9% have children not living at home. The concerns, needs and questions of these two groups alone will be markedly different.

- Effective and targeted communications and response strategies aimed at engaging and retaining female enquirers cannot assume that all women will have similar information and support needs and issues. They are as likely to have experience of children as they are to have no child-related experience. They are as likely to be partnered as live alone; they are as likely to be a couple as they are a family.
- It is evident that a one-size-fits-all response to enquiry will not adequately address the range of issues and information needs that will emanate from the enquirer set. Targeted response processes will be critical to effective engagement.

Male enquirers

Male enquirers were significantly more likely to be older and over 45 years (45+ years total sample 26.0%; males 45+ years 36.0%). They were far less likely to be married (males married 27.3%; total married 53.5%), more likely to be in a same-sex relationship (male same-sex 36.4%, total same-sex 11.3%) and far more likely to be childless (male no children 72.7%; total no children 50.6%).

However, while accordingly, male enquirers were more likely to live alone (males on own 32.6%; total on own 22.3%), they were more often in a partnered relationship than might be expected (males spouse/spouse + children 53.6%; total spouse/spouse + children 60.1%). This is likely a reflection of the higher incidence of same-sex enquirers in the male segment.

Further analysis of the male enquirers by age and same-sex/heterosexual preference provided interesting insight. Older male enquirers were more often either currently married or previously partnered (divorced or widowed and living alone) than males in general (males over 45 years married or previously partnered and living alone 52.0%; males married or previously partnered total 36.4%).

Where enquiry was made by a male under 45 years of age, the enquiry was significantly more often from a

Table 4: Profile of foster care enquirers – by gender

Profile	Characteristic	Males	Females	Total
Age	Under 35 years	25.0	33.2	32.7
	35–44 years	38.7	41.3	40.7
	45+ years	36.0	25.4	26.0
Marital Status	Married	27.3	57.3	53.5
	Divorced/widowed	9.1	11.6	10.8
	Single	27.3	22.8	23.8
	Same sex	36.4	7.3	11.3
	Other	–	1.0	6.0
No children	None	72.7	46.7	50.6
	1 Child	9.1	19.1	17.9
	2 Child	4.5	17.1	15.3
	3+ Child	11.3	9.2	9.5
	Left home	2.3	7.9	6.6
Accommodation	Spouse + children	16.3	33.1	30.9
	Spouse	37.3	27.9	29.2
	On own	32.6	20.7	22.3
	Share family	2.3	9.8	11.2
	Share non-family	9.3	3.3	4.3
Cultural background	Australian	68.2	80.0	78.7
	ATSI	4.5	1.6	2.0
	CALD	27.3	18.4	19.3
Total		**12.7**	**87.3**	**100**

same-sex couple (males < 45 years total 63.7%; males same sex < 45 years 76.8%).

Of the heterosexual male enquirers (n=28), 57.1% did not have children and 42.9% were fathers. In this regard, there was a tendency for heterosexual male enquirers to be somewhat more likely to have at least one child or children who had left home than female enquirers (heterosexual males no children 31.5%; female no children 46.7%).

Interestingly, male enquirers were more likely to have multicultural backgrounds than the 'average' enquirer (males 27.3%; total 19.3%).

- The increasing incidence of male enquirers also indicates a successful response to the marketing strategy of the FCCRS, encouraging enquiry from non-traditional segments of the public.
- However, the profile of male enquirers is heterogeneous and complex. Further research of the information and support needs of this segment will be critical to successfully integrating them into the foster carer pool.

Occupation of enquirers

Occupations were widespread and did not source more often from Community, Social Work or Psychology sectors (4.2%). This is detailed in Appendix 5.

Indeed the majority of respondents were from Business, Management, Communications and Media sectors (17.7%); followed by Health Care, Medical and Scientific sectors (13.2%). Students (usually mature age) and Emergency and Protective Services provided the next highest source of enquirers (11.7%).

- While there is clearly room to increase participation among some occupational sectors in the community, communications will need to remain general and inclusive across all occupations and industries. Most critically, communication strategies cannot assume any knowledge of the child protection sector.

Participation of Indigenous and culturally diverse families

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enquirers

The shortage of foster carers for Indigenous children is a well-documented and persistent challenge.[244] In accordance with the findings of the earlier evaluation of the FCCRS[245], there was almost no enquiry from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders through the Foster a Brighter Futures website and hotline in this study.

Providing relevant communication and enquiry pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families was not a goal of the FCCRS.

However, given the apparent complete lack of engagement of this segment with this recruitment strategy, this study reinforces the critical need for the provision of specific, culturally relevant and separately resourced processes for the identification of, engagement of and conversion of foster care placements for children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island heritage.

CALD enquirers

Increasing the engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families into foster care was a key goal of the FCCRS with the specific aim of building cultural competence into both recruitment and response strategies.

Previous data evaluating the FCCRS identified only 9% of enquirers as being from CALD backgrounds.[246] This had remained steady across 2008–2011.

- In this sample of enquirers, 19.3% (almost 1 in 5) of enquirers identified themselves as coming from multicultural backgrounds.

It is important to note that more reliable data collection of this information for enquirers responding to the survey instrument is a likely contributor to the marked increase. The question relating to cultural background in the survey instrument allowed for a broader range of responses and was more specific than the question on cultural background completed for the enquiry form (the data source for the Verso findings, 2012). This may have contributed to an under-reporting of the incidence of CALD enquirers via the Foster a Brighter Future process 2008–2011 and in the Verso evaluation of the FCCRS.[247]

Moreover, respondents may well have been more disposed to provide this information in the context of a survey that they had chosen to complete and less inclined toward recording this information on an enquiry registration form.

Even assuming that under-reporting of the true incidence masked the level of enquiry from prospects with a CALD background:

Such a marked increase (from 9%–19.3%) in enquiry from potential foster carers from CALD backgrounds is a remarkable finding that suggests that the FCCRS initiative had a considerable impact on increasing awareness of and engaging interest from a more culturally diverse range of potential foster carers.

Four segments of enquirers

A central finding of this study is that almost 1 in 2 people who enquired about becoming a foster carer were not from the more traditional concept of the 'foster care family', i.e. heterosexual, partnered families with current children in the home.

It would seem that there are four segments of foster care enquirers:

1. Heterosexual families – 53.5% of enquirers
2. Same-sex families – 11.3% of enquirers
3. Single adult families – 23.8% of enquirers
4. Previously partnered adult families – with children at home or children who have left home – 10.8%

This is displayed in Figure 9.

Partnered households

'Traditional' foster carers

Just over 1 in 2 of enquirers (53.5%) came from the more traditional concept of a foster care family, i.e. a heterosexual spouse partnership (married or de facto) with children.

For these families, the enquirers were most often female (93.5%), aged 30–44 years (65.6%). The family structure was most likely to be spouses living together (92.8%) with 1–3 children (52.2%). However, 1 in 3 (34.3%) were couples without children.

244 AIHW 2012, op. cit.
245 Verso Consulting, op. cit.
246 Verso Consulting op. cit., p. 28
247 ibid.

These families had widely ranging household incomes and could earn $50,000–140,000 per annum (discussed further below).

Interestingly, 19.5% indicated that they had multicultural backgrounds.

Same-sex couples

Just over 1 in 10 of enquirers (11.3%) were from same-sex couples.

Enquirers from couples in same-sex relationships were almost equally as likely to be male (42.1%) as female (57.9%). As most enquirers overall are female (87.3%), same-sex enquirers were therefore significantly more likely to be male than the total enquirer group (male same-sex 42.1%%; male total 12.7%). As noted above, male enquirers were therefore more likely to be from same-sex relationships than any other family type.

Enquirers from same-sex couples were more likely to be slightly older on average than the total enquirer group, being significantly more likely to be aged 35–49 years (69.2%) than average (total 35–49 years 51.7%). However, in general, same-sex enquirers came from across all age groups in similar proportions to the average enquirer group.

The family structure of same-sex enquirers was almost entirely couples (71.8%) without children (84.6%). However, 12.8% lived with their children at home.

While income was spread, same-sex enquirers were far more likely to earn well – the majority earning more than $100,000 in household income per year (further discussed below).

A similar proportion of same-sex enquirers were from multicultural backgrounds as found in the total sample (same sex 17.9%; total 19.3%).

The representation of same-sex enquirers in this study

The representation of same-sex couples in the foster care enquirer pool was shown to have steadily increased over the period of the FCCRS – from 0.5% to 3.7% from 2009 to 2011 respectively – by the Verso analysis of the FCCRS.[248]

However, representation at the level of 11.3% indicates a significant increase in enquiries from same-sex couples over the period 2010–12.

A number of influences in the community may have had an impact on the growing enquiries from same-sex couples, including increasing acceptance of non-traditional families within the community over the past decade. Moreover, sampling bias might have some impact on this figure – enquirers from same-sex couples may have been more inclined toward completing the survey.

Given the marked increase in response from this segment in total over 2009–2012, it is reasonable to surmise that the message 'Foster carers come from all walks of life' had particular cut-through with this segment.

Sole adult households

Examining the marital and household formations of these segments indicates that while 64.5% of enquirers were in partnered relationships, at least 1 in 3 (34.6%) expected to undertake the role of foster caring as a 'sole carer'.

Single/unpartnered enquirers

Sole carer enquirers contributed to almost 1 in 4 potential foster carers (23.8%).

Sole carers are far more likely to be female (85.2%) than male (14.8%). While this gender proportion is similar to that of the total enquirer group, and the traditional family enquirer, it must be recognised that as single potential carers, this gender split does not only represent the gender of the enquirer but also the gender of the sole carer.

Most interestingly, a sole female foster care enquirer can be from any age group but is more likely to be from the very young or older group of enquirers. Unpartnered enquirers were significantly more likely to be either under 35 years of age or over 45 years of age than average.

Sole adult carer enquirers largely live on their own (67.1%), but 1 in 4 (20.7%) share accommodation with either family (8.5%) or non-family (12.2%). Most sole adult enquirers will have no previous experience gained from raising their own children – 84.1% have no children of their own.

Most sole carers (74%) earn less than $80,000 per annum (see Figure 10).

Previously partnered enquirers

Enquirers who were divorced, widowed or otherwise separated from previous partners comprised 1 in 10 of the sole adult enquiries (10.8%).

These enquirers were largely female (89.7%) and far more likely to be over 40 years of age (92.3%), the majority being 50+ years (41.0%). They lived either alone (42.1%) or with their children (44.7%). Most had previous experience of children, with 73% having at least one child. However, 27% did not have children.

248 Randle et al. 2012b, op. cit., p. 30.

Single and divorced enquirers most often earn less than $80,000 per annum and more often less than $50,000 per annum (further discussed below).

Of all sole adult household enquirers average proportions – 18.3% – are from multicultural backgrounds.

Communicating with sole female enquirers

It is important to note that 1 in 4 foster care enquirers will be sole unpartnered females who live alone.

Moreover, 40% of the 1 in 4 enquirers who are enquiring to be sole carers will be young (under 35 years) females who do not have other children and who live alone, i.e. around 1 in 10 enquirers (9.5%).

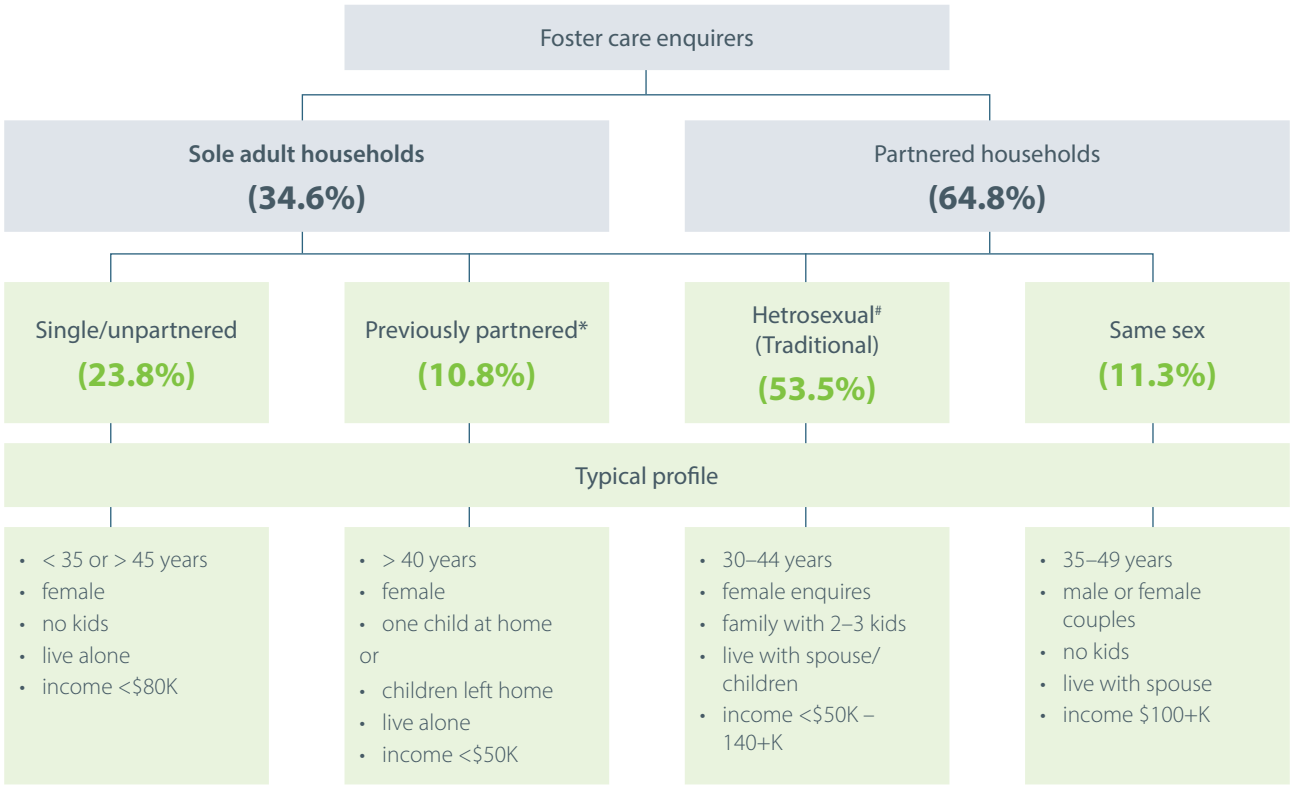
While it is clear that communication strategies to engage with unpartnered enquirers can be successful in stimulating their interest, it is of interest that this had more impact on younger women with no previous experience of child-rearing than on older women (over 40 years) with older children or children who had left home.

The potential for leveraging response from older women whose own children are older or have left home requires further research. Based on the findings of previous research, it is worth considering whether the impact of the message 'Foster carers come from all walks of life' may have had less cut-through with this segment. Investigations should pursue whether messages providing information about the positive impacts on children might have more cut-through with this segment.

It is reasonable to assume that the questions, training and support needs of young inexperienced enquirers may well be considerably different to those of partnered and child-experienced enquirers.

Further research is required to understand the needs of the 'sole adult' families interested in becoming foster carers – and particularly those without previous child-rearing experience. This will be critical to optimise the conversion of 'sole enquirers' into foster carers and to understand the support needs that will optimise their potential to provide foster care over the longer term.

Figure 9: Four segments of foster care enquirers



* divorced, separated, widowed

\# married or de facto

Table 5: Profile of foster care enquirers

Features of foster carer enquirers		
53.5%	'Traditional' households (heterosexual, partnered adults)	
	53.3%	Have children
	45.4%	Have children at home
	46.7%%	No children
46.5%	'Non-traditional' households (non-partnered and/or same-sex)	
34.6%	'Sole adult' households	
23.8%	Not 'partnered' – single/unpartnered	
	15.9%	Have children
	13.5%	Have children at home
	84.1%	No children
10.8%	Previously 'partnered' – divorced, separated, widowed	
	73.0%	Have children
	54.1%	Have children at home
	27.0%	No children
11.3%	Same-sex relationships	
	15.4%	Have children
	12.8%	Have children at home
	84.5%	No children
29.2%	Live as 'lone couples'	
22.2%	Live alone	
15.5%	Share accommodation with family/friends/adult children	
70.7%	In 'typical age range' – 31–49 years of age	
28.8%	Not in 'typical' family age range	
	13.8%	Under 30 years of age
	15.0%	Over 50 years of age
19.4%	From culturally and/or linguistically diverse (CALD) background	

Table 5 details the features of this enquirer sample. Figure 9 provides an 'overview' of the enquirer segments.

Income of enquirer households

In accordance with previous literature,[249, 250] the household income spread of enquirers was across a wide spectrum with almost equal proportions having low annual household incomes, average wages and coming from high-income households (Figure 10).

However there are marked, if not unexpected, differences in the average incomes of different segments of enquirers (Figure 10).

- The more traditional household can earn anywhere from less than $50,000 per annum to more than $140,000 per annum.
- Single and divorced enquirers are the most financially challenged as foster carers, earning largely less than $80,000 per annum and more often under $50,000 per annum.

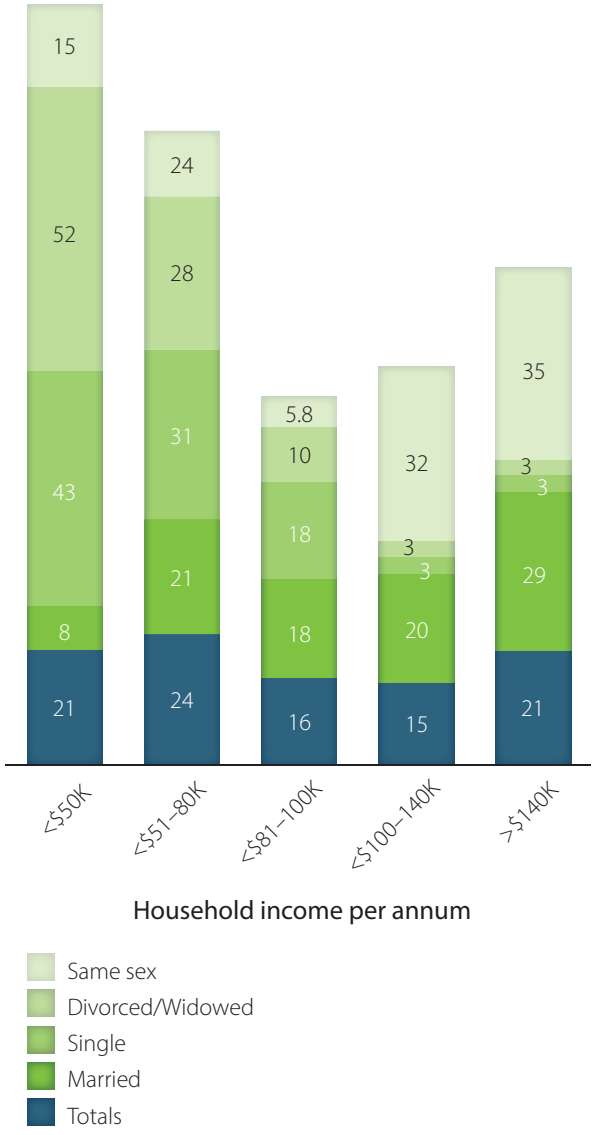
249 McHugh & Valentine 2010, op. cit.
250 Wilks and Wise, op. cit.

- Same-sex couples often earn more than $100,000 per annum.

It is aparent that 'one-size-fits-all' reimbursements for foster carers may not be appropriate to ensure the conversion of enquiries from non-traditional families and may not support a widening of the spread and range of supply to meet demand.

Concurring with the literature to date, if the objective of assuring a diverse and responsive range of foster care options is to be met, it is clear that further analysis of the reimbursements and support needs of foster carers against their income and household profiles, needs and motivations will be required.

Figure 10: Household income for each household type



Knowledge about foster care options when first enquiring

There would seem to be more potential to provide a range of placement options in the foster carer enquirer pool than is currently leveraged in placement reality.

Enquirers enquire about foster care with a reasonably open mind about the types of care they might offer. Moreover, preferences for foster caring are more flexible than foster care placement data suggests.

As a total enquirer group, there was interest in providing foster care across the range of foster care options (see Figure 11):

- While long-term (49%) and short-term (44.8%) care options were somewhat more popular, there was interest in providing emergency (37.5%) and respite care (35.4%) by at least 1 in 3 enquirers.
- While 1 in 5 (22.9%) of enquirers did not know of the type of foster care they were thinking of providing, almost all knew of the different options available (96.2%).
- Most notably, allowed to provide multiple responses to this question, few enquirers selected one option only.

Interest in providing different forms of care was found to be consistent across all socio-demographic segments. However, the following **trends** were also apparent:

- single adult households without children tended to prefer long-term care and to least prefer emergency care
- single previously partnered adults were equally likely to offer any of the four types of care
- heterosexual families tended to be more inclined to offer short-term foster care
- same-sex couples favoured long-term care.

These findings do not reflect reports of the types of care typically provided by new foster carers.[251] Preferred types of foster caring was not collected from enquirers for the Verso evaluation of the FCCRS, but was collected from foster care agencies with reference to the types of care that new foster carers provided. Verso Consulting reported that 43.1% of new carers provided respite care, 29.5% provided long-term foster care, 17.6% provided emergency foster care and 9.8% provided short-term care. Data from actual placements may, in fact, be more reflective of actual demand and placement need or training and assessment processes than of foster carer preferences.

251 Verso Consulting, op. cit., p. 31.

Increasing the foster care placement options available will require specific procedures to be put in place to ensure that the range of options that any foster carer might offer are fully understood and appropriately leveraged by foster care agencies, or the foster care system in place, in order to fully exploit the potential of the foster carer pool to meet all children's needs.

Challenges in meeting demand for respite care

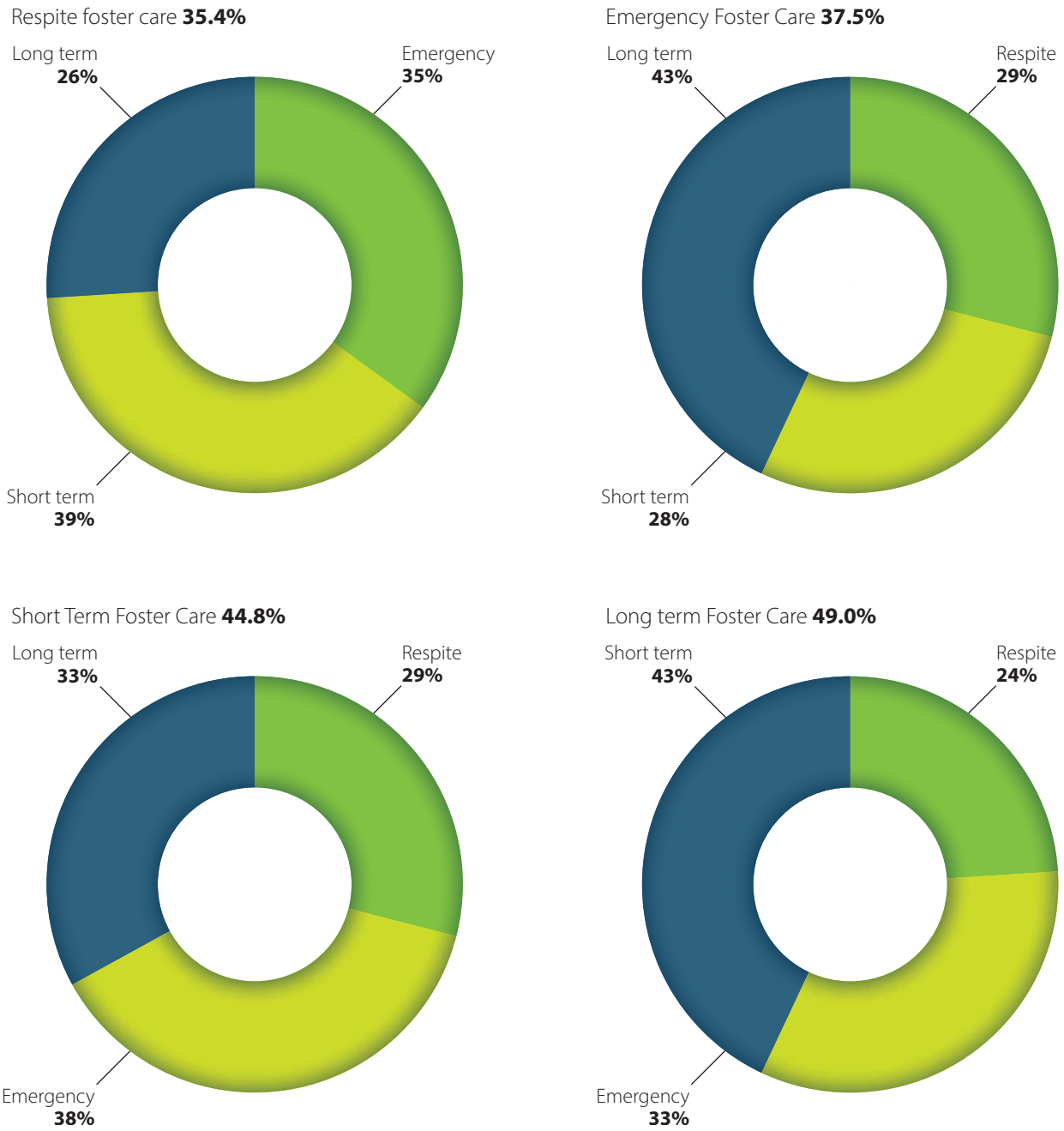
Exploring the multiple sets of foster care options provides some interesting information for further research and for ongoing recruitment strategy (see Figure 11).

This data would suggest a critical difference in the motivations of those who prefer to provide care as the primary caregiver – be it short- or long-term or emergency care – over those who prefer to offer care that provides support (respite) to other primary caregivers.

It would seem that respite carers will come from a segment of enquirers who are most interested to offer relief arrangements – respite and emergency and short-term care for children in need:

- those who selected to offer respite care were from a segment of potential carers least likely to also want to offer long-term care

Figure 11: Types of foster care chosen by other types also considered



- those offering short-term care arrangements will consider a range of alternative options but, interestingly, respite care is the least preferred
- respite care was the least preferred other option for all those who selected long- and short-term and emergency care.

If long-term options are not available, it would seem that the segment preferring long-term foster care will consider shorter term arrangements, in particular very short emergency care in the interim. However, the preference is to be the primary caregiver – not a giver of care who is providing support (respite) to another primary carer.

- Those who are interested in offering emergency care are most likely to also be interested in long-term care options.
- Carers interested in long-term foster care choose short-term care as their preferred second option but will also offer emergency care.

With increased complexity of cases accessing foster care, respite care is an increasing demand of the foster care system. The reasons for preference for or against offering respite care must be further explored for the system to provide the flexibility of options required to meet children's needs. This is an interesting distinction that indicates further research and consideration.

This data would suggest that it may be counter-productive to market 'foster care' as a generic concept. Targeting those members of the public who would most respond to offering respite care arrangements may require a separate recruitment and communications strategy.

The impact of the FCCRS

A key message of the FCCRS was 'Foster carers come from all walks of life'. The marketing collateral – usually focused on direct marketing such as posters and print advertising – developed for the FCCRS used this key message in association with illustrations of foster carers from multicultural backgrounds and from a range of ages and household configurations in order to achieve cut-through with culturally diverse families and those from less 'traditional' family types.

The characteristics of enquirers to the FCCRS clearly suggests that marketing and communications strategies targeted to engage a wider response than that of the 'traditional' Australian family can have considerable impact in engaging response from a more diverse group of potential foster carers with a wide and flexible preference set for providing different forms of foster care.

Current foster carers

Given conversion rates (discussed below), only a small number of respondents to this survey had become accredited foster carers (n=28). Of those:

- 52% had been accredited for 6 months or less (41% for 3 months or less)
- 37% had been accredited for 7–12 months
- 11% had been accredited for more than 12 months
- Of those, 25% were awaiting their first placement.

There was no significant difference in marital status – single, divorced, same-sex and heterosexual couples compared to the full enquirer set – suggesting that continuing through to accreditation is largely not influenced by demographic factors. This is confirmed by the analysis in the following chapter.

Of interest, however, is that accredited males were more likely to be found in the awaiting placement group than other demographic segments with accreditation – perhaps reflecting placement preferences or challenges for that group (total 6.0%; males 12.8%)

Type of foster care provided – comparison with preferences

With the exception of long-term care, the types of foster care that were being provided or intended did not correspond to the intentions found in the total enquirer pool (above):

- 42.3% (around 2 in 5) of those who were accredited foster carers were providing or intending to provide (in the case of those who had not yet had a placement) long-term foster care. This figure is comparable to the intention rates noted above (49%).
- Respite care was far more often provided than was evidenced by intention data (61.5% providing respite care; 35.4% interested in providing respite care).
- Emergency care and short-term care were far less often provided than intended (emergency care: 23.1% provided, 37.5% intended; short-term care 30.8% provided, 44.8% intended).

As noted above, given that intentions were flexible, this is more likely the result of demand factors than any specific intent or preference of the foster carers themselves.

The disparity between the stated preferences for types of foster care indicated by enquirers, particularly the lack of interest in respite care, and the reality of the types of foster care that are then required of them is worth further consideration with regard to the implications

for cost-effective recruitment and retention of trained foster carers. On the one hand, it may be that demand exigencies are cleverly taking advantage of the flexibility of new foster carers and recruiting them to undertake all types of foster caring in accordance with demand. On the other hand, if recruited foster carers are conscripted to provide a type of foster care that is not within their emotional, life-situation or preference set, then it is likely that this significantly contributes to carer frustration and disaffection and eventual loss from caring.

At the very least, this data suggests that the willingness and flexibility of foster carers to accommodate need despite their own preferences for the type of care that they would like to/can provide should not be taken for granted.

Procedures to understand and minimise systemic mismatch between carer preference/capability and type of foster care they are asked to provide should be considered to be a critical element of system design and cost-effective recruitment and retention strategy.

Table 6: Types of foster care accredited carers are/or will be providing

Type of foster care providing/expecting to provide (n=26 – accredited foster carers)	
Respite care	61.5%
Emergency care	23.1%
Long-term foster care	42.3%
Short-term foster care	30.8%
Don't know	7.7%

Placement load and incidence

Of most note was the load taken by these new foster carers – 23 carers were looking after 43 foster children or children in respite care arrangements:

- 51% fostering one child only
- 28% fostering two children
- 13% fostering three or four children.

For most foster carers, the time between being accredited and taking the first foster care placement was short. On average there was a 3–4 week period between accreditation and placement (29.6%). However, 1 in 5 received a placement within the week (22.2%); and 40% have received a placement within 2 weeks (40.7%).

The impact of load on foster carers and its role in 'burnout' and loss has been raised in literature. This data would suggest that more than half of foster carers care for more than one foster child. The sample size for this part of this study was very small.

However, as most insight into the impact of load on burnout is anecdotal, this provides objective data indicating support for anecdotal suggestions around the drivers of loss in the system. Further empirical and prospective research on the impact of these system-based influences on retention is warranted.

Recommendations

Based on the profiling of foster carer enquirers in this study, the following recommendations will inform a foster carer engagement strategy:

Recommendation 1

There is further potential to increase the diversity of the foster carer cohort to meet both overall demand and the needs of particular children through a mixed methods social marketing strategy similar to that of the FCCRS.

More needs to be understood about the profiles of potential foster carers, their needs and motivations and their preferred foster caring options so that targeted communications messages will have cut-through and impact.

Recommendation 2

To achieve greater diversity and to maintain enquiry rates, communications should not only be aimed at the traditional family – if that is the case, communications messages will fail to have cut through for 1 in 2 potential applicants (47%) – the number of potential carers would be halved.

Recommendation 3

Communication strategies, such as 'Foster carers come from all walks of life', can be targeted to engage a wider response than that of the 'traditional' Australian family. This offers the potential to increase the family placement options for children requiring care.

Recommendation 4

Females are the driving enquiry force for most enquiries and particularly for heterosexual couples. Given this, enquiry first-line response must communicate to the needs of women.

Recommendation 5

However, effective enquiry response scripts should also be prepared to respond not only to female enquires (majority of enquirers) and traditional families but also, with understanding, to non-traditional families and their

specific concerns – single, males, childless enquirers, CALD and other non-traditional market segments – failure to do potentially results in a conversion loss of one third of prospective carers.

Recommendation 6

Processes must enable first-line responders to recognise the broad range of profiles of enquirers, seek to identify the characteristic (or segment) of the enquirer and tailor first-line response to that segment's particular information concerns and training needs.

Recommendation 7

Male enquirers are from highly specific and able skill sets- some same-sex couples and older males with grown children, who are living alone. Communication and systems processes must take this into account and respond accordingly to ensure the potential of this group is fully employed to the benefit of children requiring care. Specific response processes for male enquires should be considered in order to respond to their different information and reassurance needs.

Recommendation 8

It is critical to build in cultural competence to both first line response and in recruitment strategies to better identify those with multicultural backgrounds adn to encourage them to consider responding to children with particular cultural needs and backgrounds.

Recommendation 9

Further research is needed to understand the types of foster care that different enquirer groups will be most interested in. Better understanding of enquirer potential and preferences incorporated into both first line response to enquiry and into processes used by agencies in training and accreditation, will pay considerable dividends in the quest to:

- increase movement from enquiry to next phase
- increase conversion to accreditation
- increase retention and
- ultimately improve the range of options available for children in foster care.

Chapter 6: Loss on the journey from enquiry to conversion

Place in the decision-making and enquiry process

This research surveyed a sample of people who had enquired to become foster carers from 2010–2012. At the time of responding to the survey, respondents could have been at any stage in the process of enquiry to accreditation – having once enquired, an enquirer would remain on the potential respondent list regardless of whether they did or did not proceed along the process of accreditation and regardless of where they were currently placed in the process. This research therefore offered a unique opportunity to explore decision making along the continuum from enquirer to accredited foster carer.

Conversion rate

The proportional rate of conversion evidenced throughout this survey varied slightly between questions, depending on the number of respondents who completed the question.[252] However, a consistent conversion rate between 8.2% and 9.2% was apparent across all questions.

Overall, this survey would suggest a mean conversion rate of 9.0% was achieved from enquirers through the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy. This is consistent with the finding of a 9% conversion rate by the evaluation of the FCCRS[253] and other previous evidence of conversion rates as being around 8–10%.[254]

252 For example, the total sample and conversion rate for those who indicated where they were in the enquiry–accreditation process (n=328 – conversion rate 9.2%) was slightly increased compared to the sample reporting if they had decided to proceed, delay or stop (n=315 – conversion rate 8.2%). A consistent conversion rate between 8.2% and 9.2% is apparent across all questions. It is likely that the 9.2% estimate is more reliable as those already accredited were less likely to respond to the question regarding whether they had chosen to delay or stop as this may have had less meaning for them.

253 Verso Consulting, op. cit., p. 24

254 ibid.

Place on the enquiry–conversion continuum

Respondents were asked where they were currently placed in the journey of becoming a foster carer in accordance with various clearly identifiable milestones along the process – these are provided in Table 7 with the proportion of respondents at each stage. An indication of where each of these stages corresponds to the process map proposed by Verso and CFECW (Figure 6) is detailed in Figure 12.

From this data it would seem that 3 in 5 enquirers (61%) do not move past the point of registering their interest:

- 3 in 4 respondents were still at the activation – enquiry stage (74.5%).
- The majority of those (61.0%) were still at the earliest stage of the post activation enquiry point – having registered their name on an enquiry form – via website, phone hotline or by direct call to an agency.
- Around 1 in 4 had continued past enquiry into the conversion process (25.5%).

Time series analysis of this data did not provide any significant relationship between staying at enquiry stage and time since enquiry: 58.9% of enquirers who enquired during the year 2010–2011 had remained at this point at the time of the survey (up to two years after registering enquiry); 62.4% of enquirers who had enquired during the year 2011–2012 had remained at the enquiry-only point.

This is a critical cost-effectiveness consideration for activation and social marketing strategy – if only 2 in every 5 members of the community who are 'activated' to apply, proceed even to the point of obtaining information, then the cost-effectiveness of activation strategies must be questioned and targeted activation strategies may well be more effective.

Table 7: Place in the enquiry to accreditation process

Place in 'process' Identified place in foster carer journey			%	
Activation – Enquiry (74.5%)	Enquiry (61.0%)	Registered name on website	23.5%	
		Registered name via phone hotline	3.7%	
		Phoned an agency	6.4%	
		Contacted by agency	27.4%	61.0%
	Information session (13.5%)	Booked	3.7%	
		Attended	9.8%	13.5%
Conversion (25.5%)	Training – 'Shared Stories, Shared Lives' (7.0%)	Booked	1.2%	
		Partially completed	1.2%	
		Completed	4.6%	7.0%
	Assessment (9.3%)	Paperwork in process	2.7%	
		Paperwork submitted	3.0%	
		Step-by-step training partially completed	1.2%	
		Step-by-step training completed	2.4%	9.3%
	Accreditation (9.2%)	Not approved	0.6%	
		Awaiting placement	2.8%	
		With placement	5.8%	9.2%

Note: activation only – those who are made aware but not yet enquired was unavailable from this sample of those who had made an enquiry.

The potential of the 'delayed' segment

Of more interest to conversion strategy are the decision states of those at each point on the enquirer-accreditation continuum.

Intention to proceed

In addition to indicating their current place in the process (above), respondents indicated their current 'intention state', i.e. whether, at the time of the survey, they were intending to proceed with their foster carer aspiration.

At the time of responding to the survey, 4 in 5 respondents (78.0%) considered that they were currently not proceeding with the process of continuing to accreditation:

- 13.6% of respondents were continuing the process of obtaining accreditation
- 78.0% had stopped or delayed the process
- 8.8 % had obtained accreditation.

The evident internal consistency of this sample compared to the full data set analysis of the FCCRS evaluation[255] provides considerable confidence in the results of this survey. However, as with any random survey, there is a potential for some bias to be inherent, with the tendency for those who respond to be those more likely to be dissatisfied with the process. Given this, it must be considered that there may be some inflation of the 'dropout rate' in this survey.

- Even taking into account potential inflation bias, the extremely high tendency for enquirers, across all segments, to 'drop out' of the accreditation process, particularly at the enquiry stage, is a critical finding for ongoing strategy.

Intention to proceed by segment

There was no evidence that any particular segment of enquirers were more likely to be deterred. Overall rates of truncating the process were not significantly influenced by whether the applicant was single or partnered, heterosexual or same-sex partnered, or by gender.

255 Verso Consulting, op. cit.

The following significant trends associated with age were, however, of note:

- Very young – 18–24s were less likely to be stopped/delayed and more likely to be pursuing accreditation (total gaining accreditation 13.7%; 18–24 years gaining accreditation 26.3%; total stopped/delayed 78.1%; 18–24 years stopped/delayed 63.2%).
- Those aged 25–29 years or over 55 years were more likely to have stopped/delayed the process to accreditation. (total stopped/delayed 78.1%; 24–39 years stopped/delayed 88.5%; 55+ years stopped/delayed 83.3%).

While intuitively understandable, further research is required to substantiate the responses and intent of very young or older potential carers, as this will have an impact on the direction and targeting of recruitment strategy.

Intention to proceed at each stage of the journey

The rate of 'dropping out' at each stage of the process is informative. Intention to proceed was analysed for each sub-set of respondents at each point in the enquiry to accreditation process. This analysis is displayed in Figure 12.

- As each stage of the journey to accreditation proceeds, the rate of loss slows. There was a marked decrease in the rate of reportedly 'not proceeding' with the process at each stage across the process to accreditation – decreasing markedly from those at enquiry stage only (96.5%) to those who reach the end of the accreditation process (7.5%) (Figure 12).

  Figure 12 includes an estimated projected loss for every 1000 enquiries across the process. At the rate of loss expected, a conversion rate of 16% would be achieved. As actual conversion rates were 9–10%, it would seem that these estimates of predicted loss across the process based on intention data are reasonable and, in fact, conservative.

Intention to proceed for respondents who reached the point of enquiry only

- Confirming the findings above, 'dropping out' of the process at the point of registration of name is acute.
  - 96.5% of those at the enquiry point of the process reported that they had stopped or delayed the process at that point.
- Loss at enquiry is not ameliorated by contact back by an agency after registering an enquiry.
  - 1 in 2 (50.9%) 'dropped out' without any contact other than registration of name.
  - 1 in 2 (45.6%) 'dropped out' after having been contacted by a foster care agency.

Intention to proceed after information session

- However, as a proportion of those who reach each stage of the journey, the greatest loss is after the information session.
- Of the 86% who do not proceed after having reached the information stage, most (67.4%) dropped out after the information session. This is an even greater proportional loss than after registering an enquiry.

Intention to proceed after 'training'

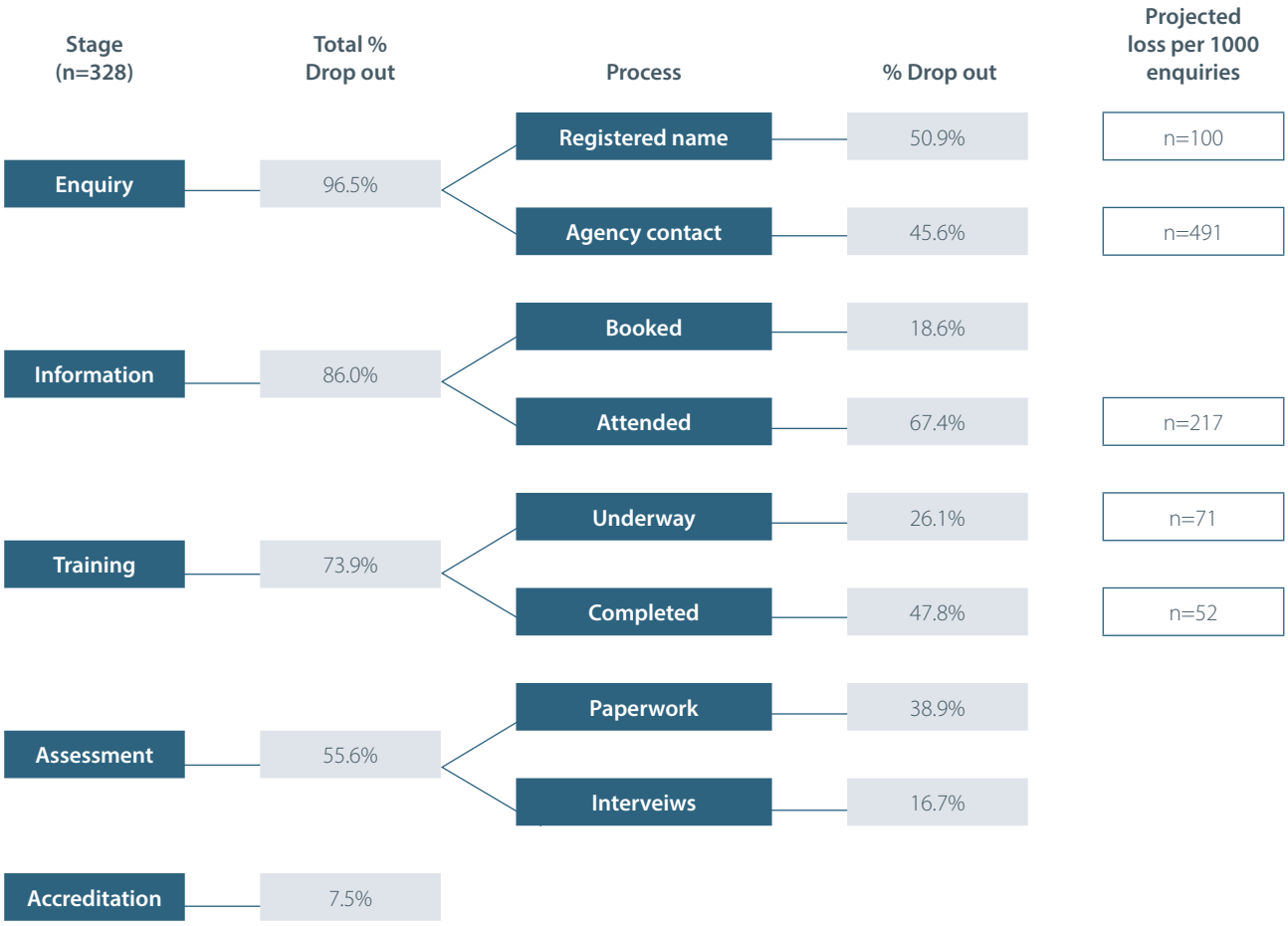
Loss after training is of concern given the resources placed into conversion at that point. It would seem that:

- In total, 31.9% – nearly 1 in 3 – of those who complete training will stop or delay the process after that point. This has considerable implications for the cost-effectiveness of the training and accreditation process.
  - 7 in 10 (73.9%) of those who reach the training stage will drop out of the process at that point.
  - Of those, almost half (around 4.5 in 10 – 47.8%) will complete the training and then stop or delay the process to accreditation at that point.

Intention to proceed after completing the application and paperwork

- Dropout rate is markedly decreased once application paperwork and assessment interviews are reached.
- However, almost half of the potential foster carers who get to this point will still drop out of the process.
  - 2 in 5 (38.9%) drop out at the point of completing the application paperwork.
  - 1 in 6 (16.7%) of potential foster carers will drop out of the process at the point of undertaking the interviews.

Figure 12: Proportion of enquirers at each stage of enquiry who delay or stop the process



Understanding 'intention states' – 'delaying' versus 'stopping' the journey to becoming a foster carer

Two pieces of information throw some further insight into the decision states that contribute to 'dropout' rates.

Respondents who proceeded past the enquiry stage were asked to further explain their decision state and to indicate whether they had decided to 'not proceed', had decided to 'pause or delay' or were currently 'considering delaying' the process. This is displayed in Figure 13.

It is clear that, for most, it is not a case of choosing to completely withdraw from any interest in becoming a foster carer, but of choosing to 'delay' the process.

Once proceeding past the enquiry stage, 'delaying' proceeding is a process of withdrawing for further consideration – most have not 'dropped out' but have 'pulled back to further consider' (53%).

This is a critical piece of insight for conversion strategy. Most of those identified as 'dropouts' in previous literature and foster carer recruitment strategy could more effectively be considered to be in a state of suspended activation – they have not lost interest but are not responding with any action.

As such, they become a segment of potential foster carers with the highest propensity to be converted into active carers.

It would seem that an effective foster care engagement strategy must include procedures for maintaining what in marketing parlance would be considered to be 'hot leads' – processes to engage and support those who remain 'activated' but are delayed in converting into action.

Strategies to leverage the 'delayed' enquirers would seem to have considerable potential. If one half of those who delayed could be encouraged to proceed, this would re-activate another 25% of enquirers along the accreditation journey. Given current accreditation rates, around 3%

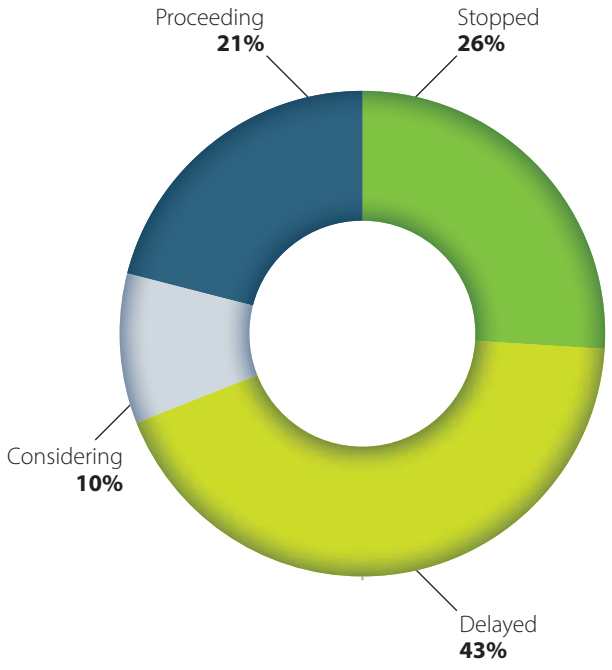
of these would reach accreditation – increasing the conversion rate from 9% to 12%.

At a conservative estimate, implementing 're-activation engagement' strategies for those who have delayed the process after being contacted by agency at enquiry (45.6%) could potentially increase conversion rates by up to 20%.[256]

The elements of such a strategy are not apparent from this data. It may require procedures to provide increased contact with and/or support and information to those who have chosen to delay – who may have doubts or are uncertain; this may be a point at which the impact of current foster carers will have most influence. These issues require urgent further research.

- Recognition of the potential of the 'delayed' segment of foster carer enquirers across the accreditation process will be critical to increasing conversion rates and leveraging the potential of the enquirer pool for foster care placements.

Figure 13: Change title to respondents at each stage of the information to accreditation process who delay stop or consider whether or not to proceed



256 Conservative estimate: Delayed after enquiry 45.6%*; proportion stopped/delayed 53.4%.

Immediate and effective follow-up of an enquiry

Some insight into re-activation strategy is gained by an analysis of the number of times enquirers choose to place themselves back into the journey.

Set against respondents' intentions states – i.e. the notion that they have delayed rather than withdrawn from the concept of being a foster carer – is information showing that while their intention may be to foster 'in the future', they in fact rarely re-enquire.

The figures in Table 8 suggest that when first-time enquirers withdraw, they rarely 'self-return' to the enquirer pool. Few enquirers make more than one enquiry. Of those who have enquired more than once (n=48), 86.7% had enquired once before; more than two enquiries was rare (13%).

Table 8: Proportion of enquirers who had enquired more than once

More than one enquiry made into becoming a foster carer	
Accredited foster carer (n=7)	26.9%
Currently in the process of accreditation	18.6%
Stopped/delayed accreditation process	12.7%
Total sample	14.7%

This data would suggest the following conclusions for follow-up by further research:

- Responding well to engage an enquirer at their first enquiry will be a critical element of an effective acquisition strategy – returning for another enquiry is rare.
  - For almost 9 in 10 respondents, this was their first enquiry into becoming a foster carer (85.3%).
- On the other hand, engaging at first enquiry will be a challenge, as those who become accredited are more likely to have enquired more than once.
  - Those who were accredited were twice as likely to have enquired at least once before the enquiry from which they proceed onto accreditation.
  - Those in the process of gaining accreditation were more likely to have enquired before.
  - Those who had 'stopped' tended toward being more likely to be involved in their first enquiry.

While the sample size of accredited foster carers is small, it would seem that first-time enquirers are less likely to convert to foster caring. There is a significant

link between the number of enquiry times and going through to accreditation.

- Re-activation strategy for the 'delayed' segment will require persistent follow-up of 'hot leads' – the delayed pool.
  - Of the 9 in 10 who had made only one enquiry, well over half of these considered that they had 'stopped or delayed'.

This lack of further self-initiated contact must be a critical consideration of re-activation strategy. Clearly this segment has potential but must be actively sought. Most critically, it is important to understand why those who believe that they have 'withdrawn to re-consider' and are still interested 'at a later date' do not then re-enquire.

Recommendations

The analysis of the profile of 'dropping out and intentions states' from enquiry to accreditation suggests the following recommendations:

Recommendation 10

One half of enquirers who have withdrawn at any point along th enquiry-accreditation process have not 'dropped out' but have 'delayed'. Re-engagement of only one half of the delayed group could potentially increase conversion rates by 20%. Drop out across the process threatens effective and efficient foster carer engagement. Targeting this is a critical element of an effective and efficient acquisition strategy.

Recommendation 11

An engagement and recruitment strategy should re-define those who withdraw from the process – they should not be considered to be lost but, in most cases to have the potential for further engagement and 're-activation'.

Recommendation 12

An efficient and effective foster care recruitment strategy will include procedures to identify and continue engagement with those delaying or re-considering their choice to proceed. This has the potential to have a marked impact on conversion rates.

Recommendation 13

Further research is required to substantiate the dropout rates of very young (less than 29 years) and older (55+years) potential carers as this will have an impact on the direction and targeting of recruitment strategy.

Recommendation 14

Enquiry is a process that might take a number of return enquiries to convert an enquirer into a foster care prospect. Communication and first line response upon enquiry should support this. Processes to encourage re-enquiry could assist in increasing conversion rates – particularly in a strategy to address those who have delayed.

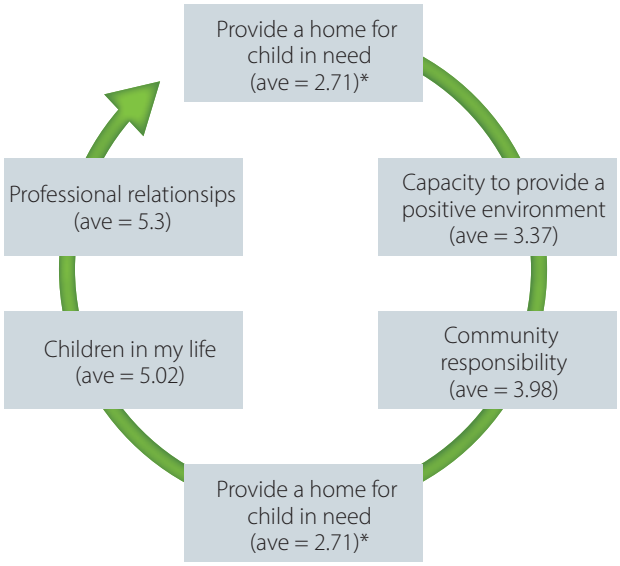
Recommendation 15

Assuring immediate, reliable and effective follow-up of every enquiry will greatly decrease loss and support the re-enquiry process.

Chapter 7: Motivations and barriers

Activation – motivations for becoming a foster carer

Figure 14: The primary motivations for wanting to become a foster carer



The value of 'giving back' as an individual and community

Respondents were asked to rank a list of 10 potential inspirations for becoming a foster carer derived from the reported motivators of foster Carers evidenced in a qualitative pilot study undertaken by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare earlier in 2012.[257]

The most important motivations for making an initial enquiry (activation) are displayed in relative rank order in Figure 14.

- The most important inspirations for wanting to be a foster carer centred on:
  - the value of giving
  - the value of being in the right place in life to be able to 'give' effectively as both an individual and as a community.

The single most inspiring motivator across all enquirers was the desire to give to vulnerable children expressed as:

- 'I want to provide a home for a child in need' (ave = 2.71).

The second most important inspiration was being in a personal place in life in which there were the capability and resources to provide a positive outcome for a vulnerable child:

- 'I am in a place in my life where I could provide a positive environment for a child' (ave = 2.37).

The next most common inspiration specifically noted personal and community responsibility to share good fortune and support the more vulnerable:

- 'I believe that caring for vulnerable children is the responsibility of the whole community' (ave = 3.98)
- 'I have a good life and I want to share it' (ave = 4.12).

Segment differences in motivations

Of most interest was the consistency of the priority of these values across all segments and types of foster care enquirers. This commitment did not change across gender, age, segment, place in accreditation process or any other variable.

Motivational differences in those who reach accreditation

On the other hand, while priority did not alter, there is much to be learned from the relative strength of these values in different segments. Some motivators were significantly stronger (significantly lower mean compared to total mean) for some sub-segments. Those currently accredited were significantly more likely to hold motivations related to their personal commitment to providing foster care.

This would seem to suggest that for those who continue through to accreditation, the motivating inspirations of sharing and personal commitment to foster caring sustain them through the accreditation process.

257 Methodology note: Respondents ranked 10 optional motivators from 1 to 10 where 1 was highest ranked and 10 was lowest ranked. Mean scores (ave) are the mean ranking for each option. A lower mean score indicates a higher ranking and, therefore, a more important motivation.

Currently accredited respondents were significantly more likely to value the following motivators as important (but not to rank them higher):

- 'I am in a place in my life where I could provide a positive environment for a child' (ave accredited = 2.95; ave total = 3.37)
- 'I have a good life and I want to share it' (ave accredited = 2.93; ave total = 4.12)
- 'I want to give my children the experience of sharing' (ave accredited = 5.13; ave total = 5.69).

There are a number of implications for further foster carer engagement strategy and research. In particular, the following questions are raised with regard to effective targeted social marketing and communications messages designed to promote 'activation' of the community.

- Are activation messages emphasising the 'positive outcomes for children' effective in promoting conversion or do they promote an emotional response that will erode when the reality of foster caring is considered?

  It has been widely thought that such messages improve recruitment rates. However, it would seem that it will be critical to discriminate between messages that activate and those that activate and convert.

- Will pairing activation messages around 'outcomes for children' with truthful information be more effective in conversion?

  This would seem to be a direction for communications messages that should be further investigated.

- How do we identify those in the community with stronger personal commitment and leverage this segment for conversion?

The desire for children as 'part of my life'

While it was not a higher priority than for other groups, those who were least likely to have children of their own – single unpartnered enquirers and same-sex couples – were more likely to rate the desire to have children in their life ('I want to have children in my life') as important (ave single = 4.52).

Of all groups, this was a significantly greater influence on same-sex couples' desire to be foster carers (ave same-sex = 4.17). Those under 30 were more likely to include this influence in their reasons for enquiry; however, this was most pronounced for 24–29 year olds. (ave 18–24 = 4.36; ave 24–19 = 4.23)

The role of 'desire for a child' on motivation to foster care is worth further consideration.

- First, this motivation has considerable implications for responding to these segments of enquirers. They may require increased support and more in-depth information about the impact of foster caring on their lives to be comfortable to proceed.
- Second, further prospective research must explore the impact of information on better preparing this segment for the challenges they will face, on conversion and retention of this segment and, therefore on cost-effective recruitment strategy.

Segments requiring 'confidence' in their abilities

It would seem that for those not in relationships or families, confidence in dealing with children built from professional experiences and real-time experience of the role of foster carers can play a role in their interest in becoming a foster carer.

The role of the experience of successful relationships built with children in professional lives was a more pronounced influencer for single (ave single = 4.91) and divorced enquirers (ave divorced = 4.8). This was the greatest influence, after the top four, for singles under 25 years (ave 18–24 = 3.83).

- 'I have built relationships with children in my professional life (e.g. kindergarten, childcare, teaching) and feel that I have the skills for foster caring'
- 'I have friends or family who are foster carers'.

Divorced enquirers were less likely to say that they have a good life that they want to share (ave divorced = 4.7) but more likely than other groups to rely on experiences in professional life as confidence builders (ave divorced = 4.8). Moreover, this group was more likely to be influenced by experience of foster care – having friends or family who were foster carers (ave 24–29 = 5.79).

It would seem that support processes will be critical for converting the sole adult enquirer and resources and supports should be part of the engagement strategy for this segment. Program strategy should explore the role of other carer families and extended networks – such as that proposed by 'mirror families' in enabling foster caring in this segment.[258, 259]

258 Mirror Families is an early intervention model that supports positive, lifelong outcomes for vulnerable children and young people who are in out-of-home care by creating a 'village', or extended family so that lifelong supportive relationships can be established and nurtured.

259 Brunner, C. & O'Neill, C. 2009, Creating extended families for life. *Children Australia*, 34 (4).

Interestingly, concern for the role of past institutions on children's lives did not play a major role in influencing enquiry. This data was collected before the current Royal Commissions into Institutional Response to Child Abuse.[260]

Activation and enquiry – influences and barriers

In order to explore the barriers to activation separately from barriers to enquiry the sample was segmented by time of enquiry. First time enquirers were asked why they had not enquired before now to be a Foster Carer. Those Enquirers who had enquired before were asked their reasons for not proceeding at their first enquiry.

The consistencies and differences between these two segments provides considerable insight into the factors that impact choices at the very earliest consideration stages – at the point at which foster care aware 'public' activate into foster care enquirers and then at the point in which enquirers may or may not proceed to become foster care prospects. The results are displayed in Table 8.

Cost and time/infrastructure and resources

Perceived cost – in both time and resources – has the greatest impact on dropout at the point of both considering enquiry (activation) and at enquiry.

- By far the most common reason for not proceeding to make a first enquiry and for not pursuing foster caring after a first enquiry was the cost and time resources required to be a foster carer (didn't proceed to first enquiry 63.5%; didn't proceed after first enquiry 55.6%).
  - Most critically, 'I couldn't afford it' was the single greatest influence on failing to proceed after enquiry (28.6%).
  - Limited time and resources due to own family and costs were almost equally the reasons for not making a first enquiry (not activating) (costs alone 19.9%; time 19.2%, time and resources available 22.6%).

Life readiness of self and family

- Lack of personal life readiness – described largely as not being at the right stage of work/career – was the next critical decision influencer that prevented activation and enquiry but was a more critical factor in preventing activation (activation 54.8%; enquiry 31.1%).
  - Concern for the impact of foster caring on career and work (or the impact of career/work on capacity to foster) was the single biggest barrier to making an activation (44.9%), followed by the consideration that family and relationships were not in the 'right place' (35.4%).
- Emotional and life/stage readiness of family has a far more critical impact on activation (activation 51.5%; enquiry 26.2%). It is conceivable that an enquirer may have received the support of family by the time of making an enquiry.

These two factors are emotional responses – and essentially describe an understandable and rational fear of the impact of being a foster carer on the prospective foster carer's life (see Table 9).

It is reasonable to hypothesise that these influencers are exacerbated by the overriding concern for the impact of foster caring on personal and family resources – costs and time.

It is critical that social marketing campaigns designed to activate response from the public are designed to inform about eligibility and to provide information about the process to enquire.

260 11 January 2103; www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/our-work/about-the-royal-commission/

Table 9: Barriers to activation and enquiry

Reasons for not proceeding …	To make first enquiry* (n=292) 'Activation'	After first enquiry+ (n=45) 'Enquiry'
Time and resources	**63.5%**	**55.6%**
Couldn't afford it	19.9%	28.9%
Not enough time to be full-time carer	19.2%	17.8%
Demands of own children limited time and resources for another child	22.6%	8.9%
Emotional readiness of family/partner	**51.5%**	**26.2%**
Not at right stage in relationships or family life	35.3%	22.2%
Partner/family not ready	18.5%	6.6%
Friends/wider family advised against	4.8%	4.4%
Emotional readiness of self	**54.8%**	**31.1%**
Work life/career – not at right stage	44.9%	20.0%
Didn't think I would be capable	9.9%	11.1%
Timing/quality of information	**49.1%**	**7.1%**
Could not get enough information/answers to my questions	22.7%	1.1%
Didn't know where to enquire	8.9%	–
Didn't think would qualify	17.5%	6.0%
Thought about it but didn't follow up	**24.3%**	–
Never thought of it before/didn't know about FC	**11.0%**	–
Other	**14.2%**	**51.1%**

* What prevented you from making enquiry before now? (First-time enquirers)

+ Why didn't you proceed with becoming a foster carer when you enquired earlier? (Second/third-time enquirers)

Enquiry to conversion – influences and barriers

Respondents who had proceeded past the first enquiry but then had delayed or stopped their journey were asked to detail the influences on their decisions not to proceed. This is displayed in Table 10.

Personal emotional capacity

While time and resources were the primary barriers to activation, they were not the primary reason for delaying/stopping the process of becoming accredited after making the first enquiry.

If a respondent had moved past initial enquiry, time and resources were second in importance to personal emotional readiness.

- From enquiry to accreditation, personal emotional readiness to undertake the task was the single biggest impact on delaying/stopping – 9 in 10 (88%) of those who delayed or stopped after moving past enquiry did so due to feeling personally ill-equipped for the task of foster caring.
- Not feeling ready, able to cope, that it was right 'for me' or wanting more time to think was cited by 3 in 5 (61.5%) of those who withdrew from the process.

Time and resources

- Time and resources were of concern to 2 in 5 (44.5%) – in particular, the cost of foster caring was at issue for 27.4% (see Table 9).

Table 10: Reasons for not continuing after this enquiry

Reasons for delay/stopping process	After enquiry* (n=260)
Emotional readiness of self	**88.0%**
Not sure I was ready	33.3%
Changed mind/wanted to think about more	15.4%
Not sure right for me	5.1%
Not able to cope emotionally	7.7%
Personal situation changed and could not commit	26.5%
Time and resources	**44.5%**
Not sure could afford it	27.4%
Not enough room in home	17.1%
Timing and quality of information and response	**30.9%**
Not enough info/questions not answered (n=12)	10.3%
Could not get to convenient info session (n=12)	10.3%
Delays too long (n=12)	10.3%
Emotional readiness of family/partner	**11.1%**
Family not supportive	11.1%

The critical and pervasive influence of wider family and community

The important role of the wider family and community as information sources and in influencing decisions was a surprising finding of this research.

It is clear that foster carers pay particular attention to the opinions of the wider community in which they live their lives – their friends, colleagues and workmates – before they choose whether or not to proceed with foster caring at each stage of the foster care enquiry to accreditation process.

Figure 14 displays the array of influences on decision making at each point in the enquiry to accreditation journey. It is interesting that, despite the fact that respondents did not overtly recall their wider circle of family and friends as influencing decisions to activate, enquire or proceed (Tables 9 and 10), this source was referred to ubiquitously across the course of the enquiry to accreditation journey.

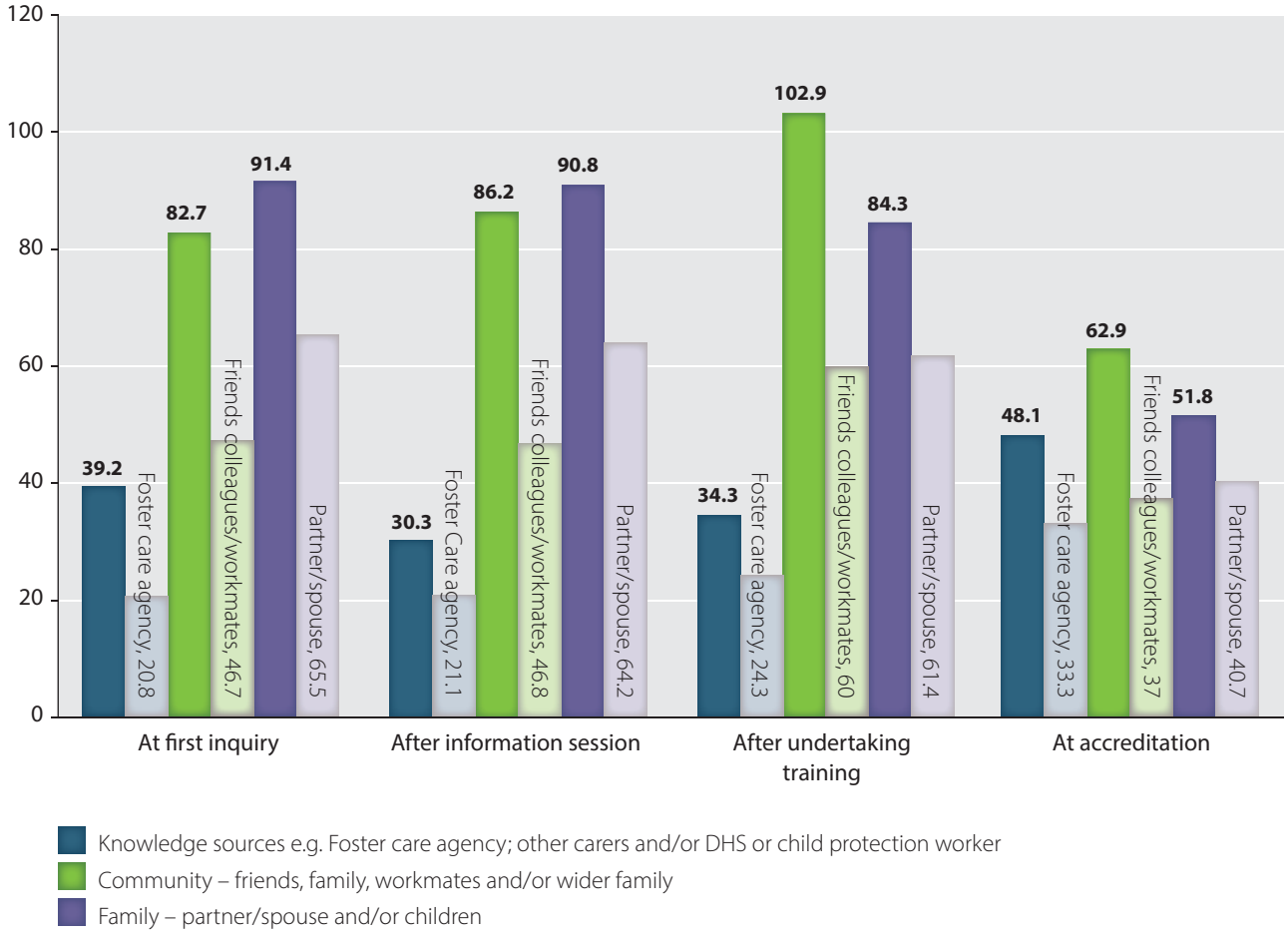
At the time of first enquiring:

- almost all enquirers (91.4%) discuss their decisions with immediate family – children (25.9%), partner or spouse (65.5%)
- the wider community – including family outside the nuclear or immediate family base of spouse and children, and even more often, friends, colleagues and workmates – are sought for their advice by 4 in 5 enquirers (82.7%)
- wider family (36.0%)
- friends, colleagues, workmates (46.7%)
- the opinion of friends, colleagues and workmates (46.7%) is the second most influential group after partner/spouse (65.5%)
- only 1 in 3 (39.2%) sought professional advice or guidance from a recognised knowledge source such as foster care agency (20.8%), other carers (11.9%) or DHS representatives/child protection workers (6.5%).

Most critically, this pattern of influence strengthened across the course of the progress from enquiry to accreditation. This is also illustrated in Figure 15.

- The role of spouse/partner opinion and advice remains understandably high throughout the enquiry to accreditation journey. However, at the point of accreditation – when it can be assumed that spouse/partners are in accord about proceeding – reliance on each other for sources of advice drops to only 2 in 5 enquirers.
- The role of community opinion remains strong across the accreditation process, peaking at the time of training (102.9% – note: multiple choice), but remaining high even at the time of moving to accreditation relative to spouse or other knowledge sources (62.9%).
- At the time of training, every enquirer reported discussing their decision with an influencer outside their immediate family, the majority for whom this was not a discussion with wider family but with friends, colleagues and workmates (102.9% – note: multiple choice).
- On the other hand, professional sources remain a low priority as providers of information and advisors. Even just before moving into accreditation, at a time when all enquirers can be assumed to have established contact with a foster care agency, only 48% sought advice from these sources and of those, only 1 in 3 (33.3%) turned to that foster care agency.

Figure 15: Information and advice sources at each point in the enquiry to accreditation journey



Multiple responses.

Figure note: The darker coloured bar labelled with the percentage response indicates the percentage response to each category in the legend above at each point at each stage in the enquiry-accreditation process. The adjacent concave bar indicates the highest response within each category.

Further research is required to understand the specific role that these sources play. What is the role of negative community perceptions on decision making? What is the extent of this impact compared to the personal desire to be a foster carer and the inherent value of giving and sharing with a vulnerable child? Most critically, what is the perceived independence and reliability of the advice to be obtained from agencies that provide and train in foster caring? Why are they not used as sources of advice even after relationships have been established and well into the accreditation process? What does this mean for the delivery of communications to and the recruitment of foster carers?

Managing barriers – end-to-end engagement strategy

The different priority of the influences on activation, enquiry and continuing after enquiry is of considerable interest.

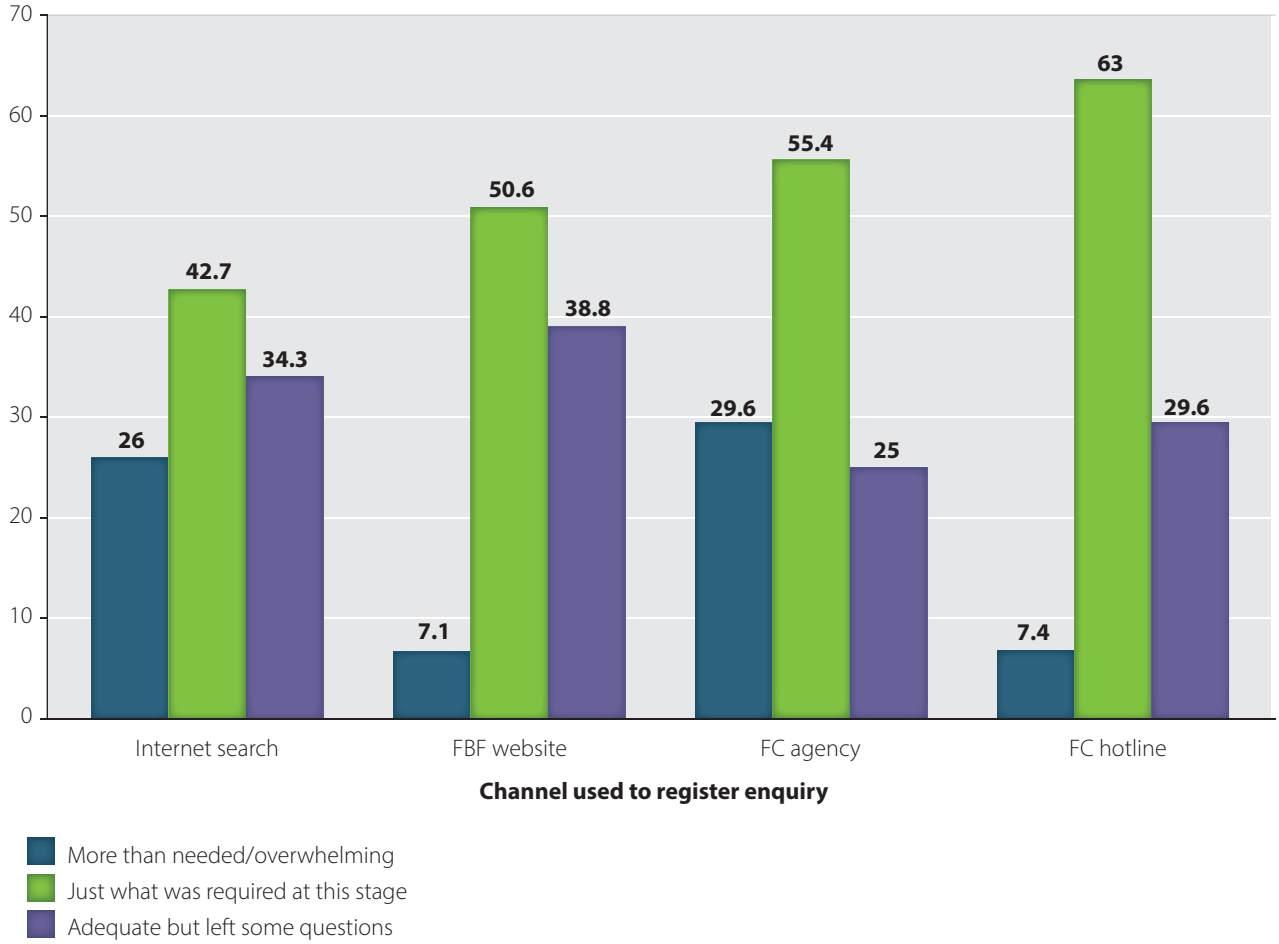
This data suggests that more clearly and accurately defining the activation, enquiry and conversion processes across the foster engagement process will provide considerable insight into successful engagement strategy.

Essentially, a rational fear of the impact of being a foster carer on the prospective foster carer's life –both personal and family related – combine with considerations of cost and resources to have a negative impact on activation. It is reasonable to hypothesise that these influencers are exacerbated by the overriding concern for the impact of foster caring on personal and family resources – costs and time.

At the point of enquiry, the impact on self and family life is less acute as a barrier – withdrawal from proceeding is most critically influenced by the costs of caring, combined with a variety of personally specific reasoning.

Further research is required to gain more understanding of these factors – in particular, analysis of the interaction

Figure 16: Quality of information provided by channel used



effects between personal readiness and reimbursement will be critical to effective engagement strategy – at both the activation and enquiry stage.

Further research is required to understand how appropriate information and support structures could work to ease the fears for some potential carers. Moreover, modelling research is recommended that can tease out the influence of personal misgivings under different funding models.

Enquiry to conversion – the role of systems barriers

Inadequate information – impact across activation, enquiry and conversion

Referring back to Tables 9 and 10 also gives insight into the influence of process and systems barriers along the activation to conversion journey.

Lack of understanding about foster caring – where and how to enquire, who would qualify etc. –influenced the activation of 1 in 2 interested enquirers (49.1%).

- 22.7% cited that they could not get enough information or answers to their questions at the time of considering making an enquiry (activation) (Table 9).

Clearly, these respondents did eventually find their way to the Foster a Brighter Future website to register an application and to become enquirers. However, it is interesting that lack of understanding and information about foster caring and how to offer to undertake it significantly delayed the activation of 1 in 2 of the community who were interested in undertaking foster caring (Table 9).

The lack of readily available information had a far more critical negative impact on activation than on enquiry to conversion.

Inadequate information provision, along with system delays, was an influencing inhibitor to conversion of enquirers.

The third biggest barrier to accreditation was perceived to be the lack, inadequacy or poor timeliness of information provided during the accreditation process.

- 1 in 3 respondents (30.9%) had chosen to delay because they were not happy with the information provided and the extent to which their questions were answered.

Successful end-to-end engagement strategies will ensure easily accessible information that enables a seamless flow through to enquiry and will take into account the image of foster care as it affects the value placed on caring and the role of carers in the community.

Quality of information provided

In order to further explore the question of the impact of the information received on decisions to continue, respondents were asked to rate the quality of the information received at enquiry. Responses are detailed in Figure 16 in accordance with the media channel used to first make an enquiry.

A further discussion of channel of enquiry is undertaken in chapter 8. However, clearly three conclusions provide insight into a discussion of systems barriers:

- Around 1 in 2 enquirers found exactly the right amount of information at enquiry regardless of channel of enquiry used.
- However, clearly dedicated channels such as dedicated websites and hotlines were most effective.
- Contrary to popular belief, clear, precise information – such as that offered by a dedicated website or hotline – is not overwhelming.
- Around 1 in 3 did not receive sufficient information to cover their queries.

Attempts by this study to understand the nature of information that might contribute to dropping out or delaying did not prove useful. Some enquirers indicate that they were not able to make the 'commitment needed' (6.8%). However, less than 4% of those respondents who had delayed or stopped the process of becoming a foster carer agreed with the following:

- The information I received convinced me I would not make a good foster carer (1.7%)
- The information I received was not realistic or truthful (2.6%)
- The information I received about the types of children I would be dealing with made me reconsider (3.4%)
- The information I received made me realise that I could not make the commitment needed (6.8%).

It is clear that easy access to clear and useful information will be critical to activation and enquiry. Qualitative research with the general public is recommended to clearly understand the information gaps and needs that must be addressed by social marketing campaigns.

Responsiveness and experience at each stage of enquiry to accreditation

Further understanding of the role of systems barriers in 'dropout' and delay along the enquiry to accreditation journey was obtained by asking for objective data on experiences – rather than subjective data of their impact.

Respondents at each stage of the enquiry to accreditation journey were asked to recall the timeliness of the response at each of the stages that they had proceeded through and provided data on the experience at each point in the process.

On average, response rates were efficient and timely across all stages of the enquiry to accreditation process. Moreover, experiences were positive and could not be considered to be of sufficiently low quality to cause substantial loss of interest in proceeding to becoming a foster carer.

However, some critical systems issues were evident. Figure 17 displays reported response rates at each stage of the journey.

Enquiry – the impact of agency responsiveness

This data does reveal two critical points of breakdown in responsivity at the enquiry stage:

- 1 in 10 respondents (12%) were not contacted after registering their name as an enquirer
- 1 in 4 enquirers (23%) were not contacted by a foster care agency after registering their name.

The critical loss of potential foster carers from this lack of responsivity will have a significant impact on conversion rates. Given current conversion rates, only 1 in 10 enquirers proceed to accreditation. If 1 in 10 enquirers is lost through lack of response to an enquiry on the website or hotline, then this will have a marked impact on conversion rates.

Most critically, the lack of responsiveness from the foster care agencies after the enquirers have been referred to them constitutes a significant breakdown in the conversion of enquirers to foster carers.

Under the FCCRS process, enquiries to the website/hotline were responded to by phone or email and then referred to an agency for follow-up. The agency referred was selected on a rotational basis and not in accordance with any characteristics or relationships with the FCCRS. Forty-six percent of respondents waited only up to one week to be contacted by a foster care agency after contacting the foster care enquiry line. For one third, contact was within a few days (29.2%). However, 58.4% waited more than a week for a response, 22.1% waited up to a month for a response and 23% (1 in 4) were never contacted.

Given the extent of 'dropout' exhibited at the enquiry stage, if 1 in 4 of those who move past the initial information provided at the return phone call to be interested in further discussion toward proceeding are simply not contacted, this will have a significant detrimental impact on conversion rates.

Lack of response from agencies may well be due to lack of resources to undertake this role. However, taken together with the evidence that the adequacy of the response had impact on decision to 'stop or delay' for 1 in 3 (discussed above), this is evidence of a considerable systems barrier on conversion efficiency and cost-effectiveness of current foster carer recruitment efforts. A cost-effective engagement strategy must build in systems processes to eliminate loss at the agency response point in the enquiry to accreditation journey.

Enquiry – experience of information session

Once having established contact with an agency, experiences thereafter indicate a clear effort to provide a seamless and consistent response.

On average, most respondents (63%) attended an information session within one month of enquiry. However, around 1 in 3 (37%) waited more than three months for an information session to be provided. This is the point of greatest delay in the accreditation process.

Respondents seemed to have a positive experience of this stage of the process. Information sessions were almost universally provided by the foster care agency (90.3%) and for most were undertaken by the same workers who initially contacted the enquirer (63.6%). Sessions were undertaken either in groups or individually, suggesting that agency response endeavoured to provide immediacy of response over waiting for 'a group' of enquirers to be available.

- Just over 1 in 2 attended group sessions (57%).
- Just under 1 in 2 had individual sessions (43%).
- 1 in 3 had workers come to their home to provide the information session (35%).

There would seem to be little evidence that it is the experience of the information sessions that contributes to the large dropout at this point. Further qualitative data collection is recommended at this stage of the process.

Experience of training

Training was also usually provided within four weeks of the information session.

However, the training process was delayed for up to three months for 1 in 3 (32%) (see Figure 17).

Most (85%) completed the 'Shared Stories, Shared Lives' training before assessment interviews and completed training in a group session (87%) provided by the foster care agency (93%).

Experience of assessment interviews and paperwork

The experience of the assessment interviews does not seem to have a negative impact on the accreditation journey.

Assessment interviews were undertaken in the enquirer's home by two workers (79.4%) and for most, at least one of those workers was known to them (82.4%). Self-reports of the experience were positive, with 97% reporting that they felt comfortable with the number of workers undertaking the assessment, fully supported to give their information in a way that 'fairly represented me' (94%); and did not feel intimidated (88%). Most felt that they were well prepared for the type of questions asked (79.4%), however 1 in 5 had some doubts about this (20.6% – maybe 11.8%; probably not – 8.8%).

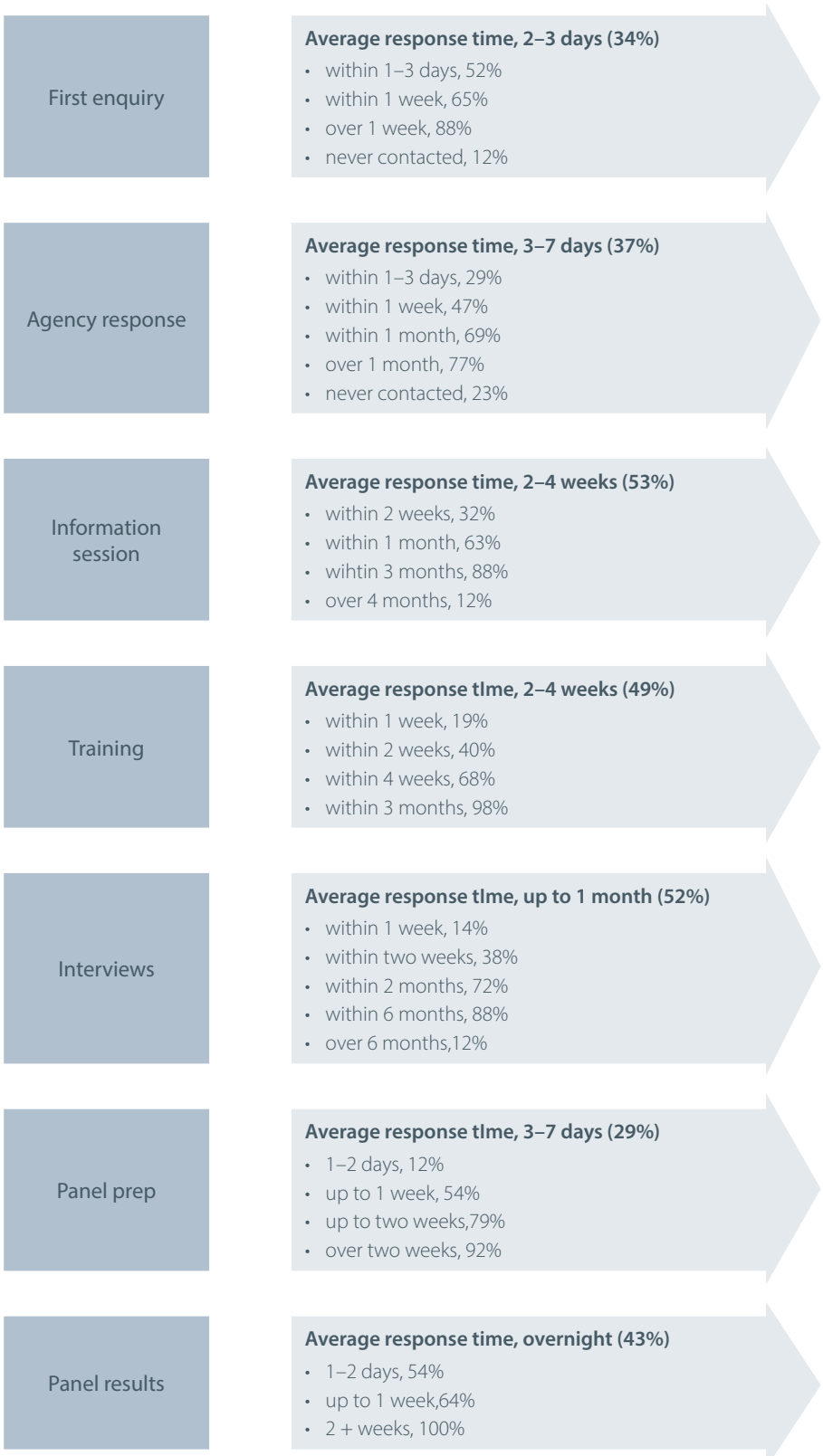
Again, for most, assessment interviews were undertaken within two months of the training (72%).

However, the assessment process was significantly delayed for 1 in 3 (28%) – 16% (almost 1 in 5) waited up to six months for assessment interviews and another 12% waited more than six months.[261]

However, if 1 in 3 of those who complete training must wait 6 to 12 months to attend assessment interviews, this constitutes a serious systems barrier that will significantly affect conversion rates.

261 Note: given dropout rates from enquiry to accreditation, the sample size at this point along the continuum was small for this study (n=34).

Figure 17: Average response times per stage of process



The reasons for the delay in attending assessment interviews must be further investigated by direct research with those in the accreditation process. One indication in this study was the impact of paperwork for some foster carer prospects. In general, respondents were provided with all the support they needed to complete their paperwork associated with the application process (86%).

Half of respondents thought that the amount of paperwork slowed their application process (49% – maybe 16.4%; probably yes 24.6%; definitely yes 8.2%).

Experience of the foster care panel

The journey from assessment interviews to panel does not seem to be an issue contributing to loss. Most accessed a panel hearing within two weeks of completing assessment interviews and paperwork (79%).

The experience was largely positive – most did not attend the panel sitting (83.3%) and responses were timely with most hearing their outcomes overnight (42.9%) or within one to two days (54%) and at most up to two weeks (see Figure 17).

Self-reports indicated that the respondents who progressed to this stage felt fully supported by their foster care agency in preparing for the panel (92.8%), were fairly represented (92.5%) and did not feel intimidated by the process (89.3%).

There would, however, seem to be room for improvement in the level of understanding and perceived transparency, with 1 in 4 (25%) saying they did not feel that they fully understood how the panel would make its decisions[262]

Systems opportunities

Overall, given the average timing at each stage indicated in Figure 17, the average foster carer prospect could take around six to eight months to be processed.

This is a lengthy process and not within expectations at the time of enquiry. Only 1 in 3 enquirers expected the process to take that length of time.

Before making an enquiry, most respondents believed that the process of becoming a foster carer would be reasonably expedited. One in 5 believed the process would take a few weeks (22.3%), another 1 in 5 expected a three-month process (21.4%); another 1 in 5 expected five to six months (25.2%); just slightly more – almost 1 in 3 – held more realistic expectations of around 7 to 12+ months (31.%).

262 Note sample size, n=28

The process is largely not considered onerous and it is clear that considerable efforts are made to provide a supported and informed process.

However, it would seem that systems improvements can considerably improve conversion rates.

- While 1 in 2 rated the process as being 'reasonable', almost one third of respondents (27.5%) reported the process (so far) as being difficult (21.6%) or very difficult (5.9%).
- There is clearly room to improve systemic responsiveness – in particular at the point of enquiry and in delays between enquiry and information sessions.

Recommendations

Recommendation 16

Influences on potential foster carers vary with the engagement phase from activation to post enquiry. This is an important insight from the research. Motivation, needs and barriers that affect the activation of the public differ from the influences that affect continuation of the journey from prospective to potential foster carer.

More clearly and accurately defining the processes of activation, enquiry and conversion as separate steps of the foster care engagement process provides a framework for a successful engagement strategy.

Recommendation 17

This research concentrated on those who had made an enquiry. Insight into the motivations and barriers to activation were necessarily retrospective. Further research is required to fully understand the characteristics of those in áctivation' – both those who have enquired before and those yet to enquire.

Recommendation 18

Activation messages (derived from a social marketing approach) must include critical information and redress misconceptions. Information gapsrevealed by this research include:

- eligibility criteria
- reimbursement levels
- processes to make an enquiry and obtain a response.

Recommendation 19

Given the impact of the wider community at every stage of the inquiry process from activation to conversion, the image of Foster Care in the wider community is critical to and should be specific element of, a social marketing

and engagement strategy. Given the increasing level of enquiry from singles, same-sex couples and males, the role of community attitudes in persuading or dissuading these important potential groups of carers must be more clearly understood.

Recommendation 20

Research to understand the current image of foster care in the community is critical to an effective communications and engagement strategy. Two critical questions for future research to inform a marketing strategy are:

- What are the current images of and opinions about foster caring held by the community?
- What is the influence of misconceptions around foster care or stigma related to foster care on the choice to proceed?

Recommendation 21

The research supports recommendations that activation messages (derived from social marketing approaches) should emphasise positives for both the children and foster families, but also be clear about the reality of foster caring. However extensive communications testing is recommended. A clear understanding of the relationship between specific messages, activation and conversion is critical to effective engagement.

Recommendation 22

Qualitative research with the 'general public is recommended to clearly understand the information gaps and needs, the image perception and the targeted messages that must be addressed by social marketing campaigns.

Recommendation 23

Costs and resources are the single most critical barrier to conversion to foster caring. Reforms of reimbursement levels is urgently required.

Recommendation 24

It is reasonable to hypothesises that the influence of 'personal readiness' at the time of enquiry is compounded by concern for the impact of foster caring on personal and family resources – costs and time. Further research is required to understand how appropriate information and support structures at the time of enquiry could work to ease these fears for some potential carers.

Recommendation 25

Further research to gain more understanding of the interaction effects between personal readiness and reimbursement rates will be critical for effective engagement strategy. Modelling research is recommended in order to tease out the influence of 'personal' misgivings under different financial support models.

Recommendation 26

Research is recommended to further explore 'social responsibility' as a motivation in foster care and its influence on those who delay proceeding through the journey to accreditation. Most critically the relevance or otherwise of this motivation in re-activating interest in foster care would be valuable.

Recommendation 27

The delayed group of potential foster carers are not put off by costs so much as the emotional enormity of the task. It would seem that follow-up of this group with information and support offers a significant opportunity for recruitment and conversion. The role of current foster carers in providing information, support and encouragement at this point in the engagement process must be further explored.

Recommendation 28

An effective and efficient engagement strategy must build improved systems response in the following areas:

- resourcing to maximise follow up of enquiries to centralised intake channels
- elimination of loss at the agency response point in the enquiry–accreditation journey. This can be done by either increasing resources for response at the agency level or resourcing centralised (website/hotline) response processes

Recommendation 29

Given the system gaps identified in this study, centralisation of the recruitment and engagement process would seem to hold more potential for recruitment efficiency and conversion success. A fully resourced centralised response could eliminate system variability in response and ensure consistency of messages and information and could support the development and implementation of effective communication messages and advice targeted to the information and support needs of different enquirer segments.

Recommendation 30

The research suggests that some enquirers question whether foster care agencies are in a position to provide unbiased and independent advice about the reality of foster caring in the home and community. The nature and impact of these perceptions on any communication, recruitment and education strategy should be explored.

Chapter 8: The marketing mix – activation to conversion

Activation – the role of media and communications strategy

It would seem that a predisposition toward becoming a foster carer is a necessary condition for making an enquiry for many.

Respondents were asked what aroused their awareness and interest and promoted them to make an enquiry into foster caring. An ongoing awareness of the need and a personal interest to be involved in foster caring was a critical influencer that stimulated interest in making an enquiry.

- Having a 'personal interest or desire' expressed as 'I always wanted to' was the critical influence on making an enquiry for 1 in 2 enquirers (58%).
- Previous exposure to foster caring – either by always wanting to do it or having friends, relatives or parents who were foster carers – was the main influence in 7 in 10 enquirers (72.1%).

However, media promotion played a critical role in raising awareness and promoting call to action.

- Media coverage stimulated enquiry for more than 1 in 3 enquirers (35.2%).
- Moreover, media exposure had influence across below-the-line channels such as billboards and posters (9.6%), print media (11.5%) and TV (14.1%).

Overall there was a very low spend available to the FCCRS for promotion activity. The promotion and communication strategy was necessarily targeted and was low-level. TV commercial advertising was not readily available as there was not the budget to support this. The promotion strategy consisted predominantly of below-the-line and community events such as posters and the Rainbow Hair for Foster Care day, local newspaper stories and national TV coverage through human-interest stories where possible (although this was rare).

Given this, a reach of 35.2% is a remarkable achievement and suggests that targeted communication strategies with a well-designed key message can have a considerable impact on the pool of potential foster carers.

- Given that more than 2000 potential foster carers contacted the Foster a Brighter Future website and enquiry line each year from 2011–2012, if 35% of those enquired due to exposure to media coverage and promotional activity, then the pool of potential carers was increased by more than 700 applicants per year.

Clearly, while commitment to foster care is greatly influenced by an innate awareness derived from personal experience, reliance on ongoing 'good will' to initiate enquiries will not be sufficient to ensure adequate supply of foster carers, and a specific, targeted and funded communications and promotions strategy is critical.

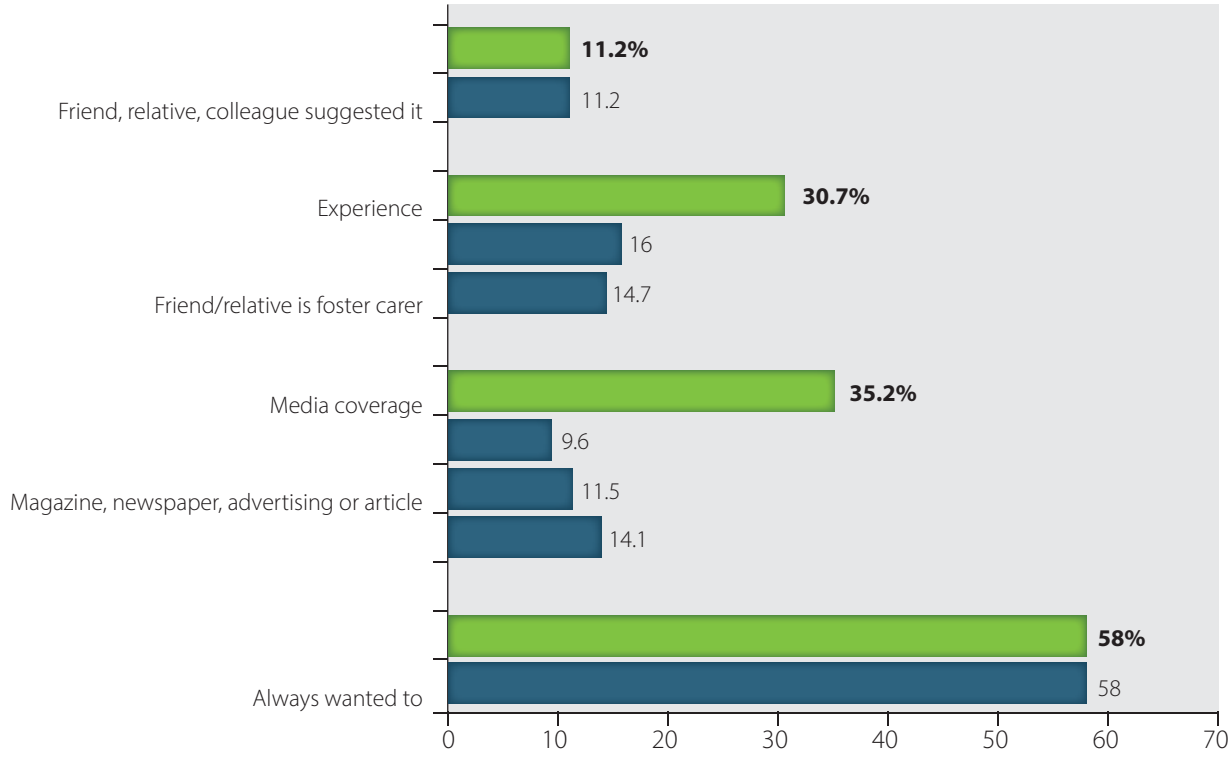
The critical role of a cohesive, consistent Internet presence and SEM strategy

A centralised, cohesive and easily accessible website

A centralised, easily accessible web page was a critical element of making an enquiry.

- The Internet – direct to the foster care website or through a search engine – was the single and central channel source for first information (97.1%).
- 69.4% (7 in 10) used an Internet search engine such as Google as the very first point of access to information and as the resource through which to find the Foster a Brighter Future website.
- 27.7% (1 in 3) went directly to the Foster a Brighter Future website when first searching for information in order to submit an enquiry.
- The Internet was the prime source for registering an enquiry.
- 7 in 10 (66.7%) completed their registration form online at first information sourcing.

Figure 18: Factors that stimulated call to action and an enquiry



- Once having accessed the Foster a Brighter Future website, 9 in 10 enquirers (90.7%) used the online registration form.
- 8.7% called the Foster Care Hotline directly.
- 18.7% contacted a foster care agency.[263]

Respondents to this study must have necessarily recorded their name on the website or through the hotline. This would necessarily inflate the role of the Internet in enquiry by excluding any enquirers who went only to an agency.

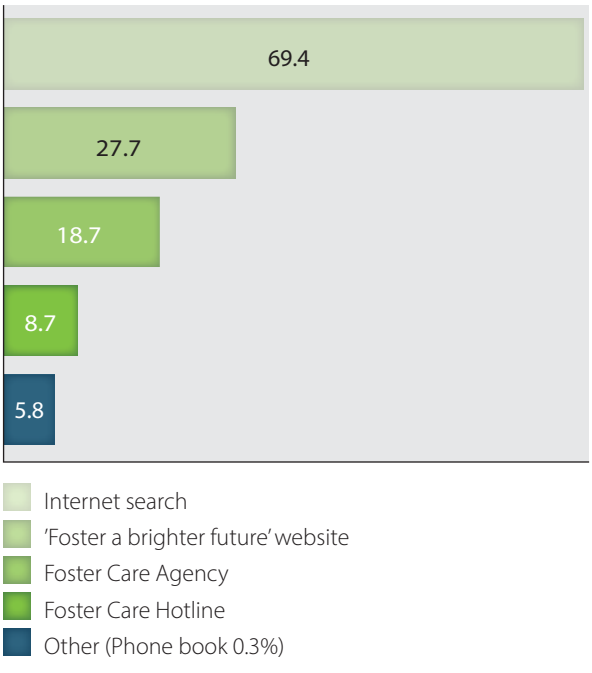
Even so, this pattern of Internet usage, in addition to the relatively low use of the hotline and referral to agencies, evidences a critical role for a clear and accessible Internet channel for first-line information and enquiry.

Clearly, centralising the FCRRS on a single and cohesive Internet-based 'gateway' to enquiry was an effective and well-targeted strategy that should be built on for ongoing acquisition strategy.

Direct contact with foster care agencies

There was a constant 17–20% of respondents who directly contacted, and then took information and advice from foster care agencies across each stage of the enquiry to accreditation process. The reason for this is not clear – it may be the result of previous associations or the result of individual marketing strategies undertaken by certain agencies. Of these, all must have contacted the hotline or entered their name on the website in order to become eligible for contact for this study.

Figure 19: Channel for first-line information and enquiry



263 Multiple response across two questions of Internet behaviour

Given the dominant influence of the Internet in the information and enquiry process, the value of localised and independent marketing by individaul agencies must be questioned. This must be considered by further research that includes those who used this access point exclusively.

The Foster a Brighter Futures website and Foster Care Hotline

- Despite a relatively low investment in the marketing process, 27.7% of enquirers went directly to the 'Foster a Brighter Future' website or to the Foster Care Hotline without being guided there through an Internet search.

This would suggest that a targeted promotion strategy with a centralised clear call to action can be highly effective.

Quality of information provided by the Foster a Brighter Future website

- Overall, 63.9% were largely happy with the information provided at their first-line contact and enquiry.
  - 48.8% were completely happy.
  - 31.6% were largely happy but had some further questions that needed to be answered.
- 2 in 5 were left with at least some unanswered questions (37.9%).
  - Only 6.3% felt that the information provided was very inadequate for their needs.
- 1 in 10 (13.2%) found the information provided overwhelming and confusing.

While an Internet-based strategy will be effective, there is room to improve the adequacy of the information provided on it. Further usability research must be directed at identifying gaps in information that were identified.

SEM strategy and acquisition

Current trends in behaviour have shown an irreversible and universal shift toward the Internet for information and to access providers of services and product. Moreover, current Search Engine Marketing (SEM) strategy recommends that marketing through Internet search is most effective when the choice set for the enquirer is clear and narrow. Many marketing dollars are spent on tools to place a marketer's web page at the top of an Internet search, with the knowledge that consumer behaviour tends toward selection of the first choice, rather than evaluation of, or selection between, website choices after completing an Internet search.

The results of this study indicate that searching for information about foster care provision is not behaviourally different. After awareness and call to action is raised by media promotion or personal desire, the potential carer will undertake an Internet search, respond to the most salient (top-of-list) website and explore there for access to further information and to register interest.

- A consistent and informative centralised Internet presence is critical to effective first-line information and registration of interest.
- Moreover, a range of optional websites appearing at Internet search (and potentially attached to differing foster care provider agencies or localised stategies) are likely to 'cannabalise' each other and contribute to decreased enquiry response.

Recommendations

Recommendation 31

A relatively small investment in a systematic and targeted communication and foster carer acquisition strategy can promote a substantial increase in awareness and enquiry (activation).

A comprehensive communications strategy with tested key messages should be further developed, with the aim of promoting awareness through consistent messages across all media and within targeted groups and communities.

Recommendation 32

Promotional and communications elements of a targeted mixed methods , social marketing strategy, such as the former Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy (FCCRS), show positive returns on investment in:

- raising awareness of naive target markets
- promoting call-to-action behaviour and enquiry from those with an innate awareness', and
- increasing the size of the potential pool of foster carers available for conversion and accreditation.

Recommendation 33

In order to ensure optimal engagement of enquirers, a communications and recruitment strategy (acquisition strategy) will need a specific SEM (search engine optimisation strategy).

Recommendation 34

A successful approach to engagement and retention of foster care enquires requires a one-stop, central, top-of-search-list website which provides enquires with

reliable consistent information. Most critically, it will be imperative to ensure that enquires are not lost or confused about the options available to them. Internet search resulting in a string of potential foster care engagement opportunities may mean that many foster care enquirers give up at that point.

Multiple enquiry channels may contribute to disaggregation of information necessary for development of comprehensive engagement and recruitment strategies which retain enquirers and target particular populations.

Recommendation 35

While it is recognised that this survey was undertaken among enquirers to the FCCRS, their choices of channel for information seem to indicate that reliance on engagement with a specific provider of agency of foster care is not necessary to successful communication and engagement strategies.

Recommendation 36

There is clearly room for further investment and improvement in the effectiveness of a central website for information and enquiry. Usability studies of the type of information required and increased resources to provide it are recommended.

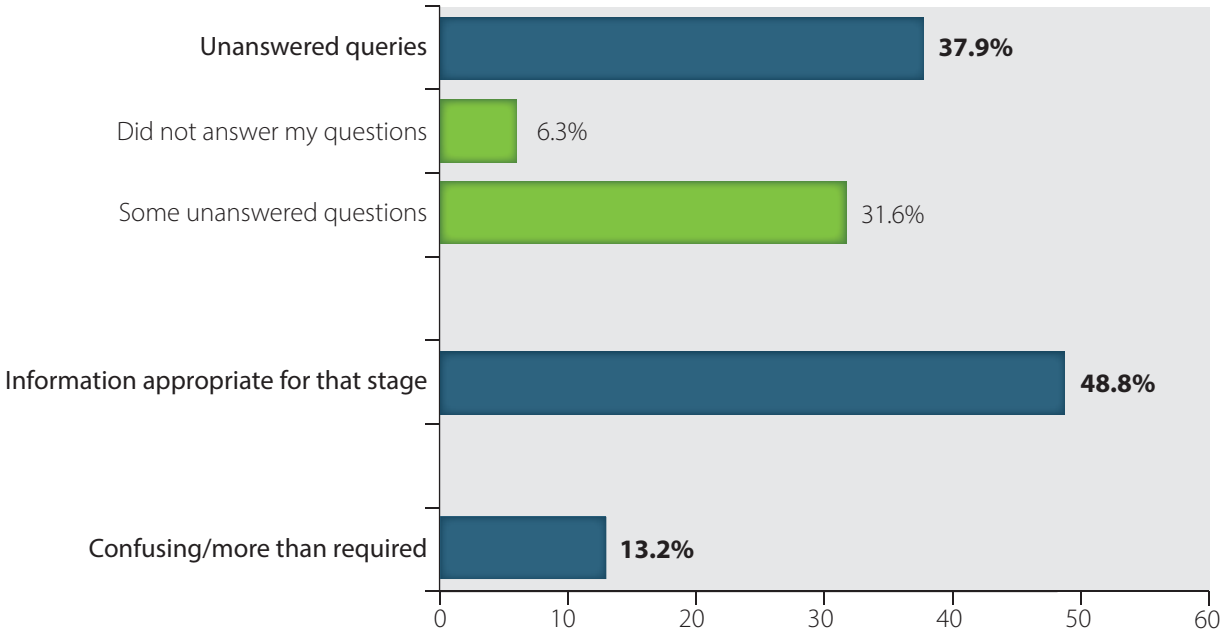
Recommendation 37

Investment and maintenance in the gains made by the Foster a Brighter Future website are recommended. There is considerable opportunity to build on this SEM strategy to develop a complete, end-to-end engagement methodology.

Recommendation 38

Future foster carer engagement strategies should aim to have long term impact through long term resourcing of a coherent strategy.

Figure 20: Rating of adequacy of information provided at first contact through website and hotline



Conclusion – the foster carer engagement process

The Verso/Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare process model of foster care engagement[264] identified the process of moving from public to foster carer information seeker, to enquirer, to prospect, to foster carer. This research, which sought information from those at the point of enquiry, provides evidence that:

A successful carer engagement strategy will provide an over-arching seamless process that actively 'manages' the relationship with the prospective foster carer and ensures targeted and segment-relevant information and responsiveness, timely and sensitive follow-up, processes to re-activate 'delayed' prospects, and active program and community-based support across the full engagement journey,

The following conclusions are indicated:

1. A foster carer 'engagement strategy' defined by a clear 'mapping' of the process of moving from public to foster carer will provide great insight into a successful end-to-end foster carer recruitment and retention strategy.

2. A marketing approach to recruitment cannot be argued with. However, clearly defining the processes of activation, enquiry and conversion as separate and distinct steps across a foster carer engagement process will provide considerable insight into the differences in 'target audience', promotional, marketing and best practice customer service elements at activation, compared to enquiry, compared to retention, and will do much to better inform effective recruitment methodology.

3. Effective and cost-effective engagement strategy will inform its promotional, marketing and 'customer service' elements in accordance with the different motivations and barriers that have an impact at different stages of the engagement journey.

4. One cohesive mixed-methods social marketing strategy with consistent key messages supported by targeted message delivery for critical segments.

   – Proactive management of the 'image' of foster caring is critical.

   – Local and/or segment-targeted promotional efforts should be consistent with the overall marketing strategy.

5. Key social marketing messages must:

   – have cut-through across the range of foster care enquiries and not focus only in the 'traditional' foster family

   – concurrently raise awareness and de-stigmatise

   – provide directions to clear and easily accessible paths for information and enquiry

   – address misconceptions and provide realistic but positive messages about foster carer role and eligibility.

Child-specific communication messages should be further trialled for their effectiveness in improving perceptions about the role of foster care in the child's life.

6. One centralised information and enquiry channel based on one central 'foster care' website that is the single reliable, independent resource for information, enquiry and to promote re-enquiry.

7. Professional enquiry response processes that are capable of responding to a heterogeneous enquiry set – with different information needs and concerns – and promote active re-enquiry.

8. There is much here to support, conceptually, the separation of the systems and processes of promotion, recruitment and enquiry response from the process of training and accreditation; however, the whole engagement strategy must work seamlessly across the entire foster carer journey.

9. Reimbursement of foster carers is a critical programmatic barrier that must be addressed for its impact on recruitment and retention across different segments of foster carers.

264 Verso Consulting, op. cit.

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Appendix 1: Time series of Children 0–17 years in OOHC

Table 11: Time series of children 0–17 years in out-of-home care by jurisdiction 1991–2012

Year	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Total
1999	6359	3581	2613	1192	1045	533	174	177	16,674
2000	7041	3867	2634	1326	1131	548	200	176	16,923
2001	7786	3882	3011	1436	1175	572	215	164	18,241
2002	8084	3918	3257	1494	1196	544	224	163	18,880
2003	8636	4046	3787	1615	1245	468	277	223	20,297
2004	9145	4309	4413	1681	1204	487	298	258	21,795
2005	9230	4408	5657	1829	1329	576	342	324	23,895
2006	9896	4794	5876	1968	1497	683	388	352	25,454
2007	11,843	5052	5972	2371	1678	667	399	397	28,379
2008	13,566	5056	6670	2546	1841	654	425	398	31,188
2009	15,211	5203	7093	2682	2016	808	494	482	34,069
2010	16,175	5469	7350	2737	2188	893	532	551	35,895
2011	16,740	5678	7602	3120	2368	966	540	634	37,648
2012	17,192	6207	7999	3400	2548	1009	566	700	39,621

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

This is an example questionnaire. Questionnaires varied with the stage at the engagement journey of the enquirer. A full copy of the questionnaire can be obtained from the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

Email: communications@cfecfw.asn.au

Telephone: (03) 9614 1577

Appendix 3: Ethical considerations

This ethical process was reviewed by Professor Cathy Humphreys of Melbourne University School of Social Work and conformed with the requirements of the Australian Market Research Association and the Australian Psychological Society.

Contact consent

At the time of enquiry, enquirers were asked, 'Can we contact you about your experience of our service?' and indicated their consent by making the 'YES' response.

Participation consent

On entering the survey, potential respondents were asked to select from the following two options:

- I would like to do this survey. (98.1%)
- I do not want to do this survey. (1.9% = 7 chose to not go on)

370 enquirers entered the survey. Of those, 98.1% (363) chose to participate and to continue the survey.

Process consent

Respondents were informed that they were able to exit the survey at any time and given the choice to submit, or to not submit the completed form.

Further contact

All respondents were asked to indicate consent for further contact.

Duty of care

All respondents were provided with a return email address that was fully moderated. Any concerns or requests were followed up with further information and/or referral where permission was received in writing (return email) for referral.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Only the details of those respondents who indicated a willingness to participate in further research have been retained. All respondents were identified by an ID number. All enquirer details and data were stored under password protection on a secure server until no longer required for the purposes of the study, at which time they were deleted.

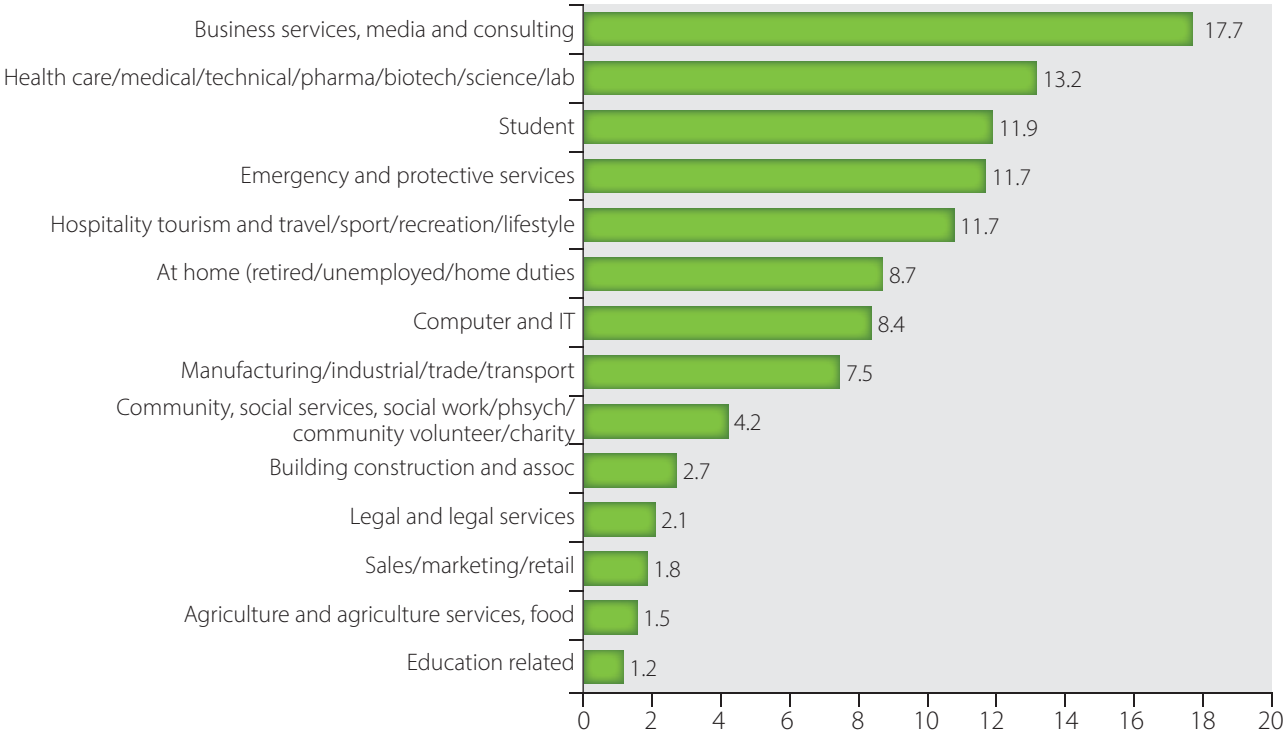
Appendix 4: Sample representativeness – comparison with full enquirer data evaluation[265]

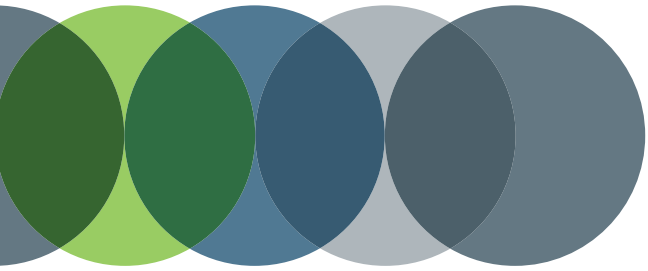
Household composition	2011 enquirer data: enquiry form data (Verso Consulting, 2012)	2010–2012 survey sample Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2012
Single women	31.9%	30.3%
Single men	3.5%	4.6%
Couples without child/ren	15.8%	18.4%
Couples with child/ren left home	4.9%	4.0%
Couples with child/ren at home	36.2%	31.3%
Same-sex couple	3.7%	11.4%
Other	4.0%	–
Total	**100%**	**100%**

265 Verso Consulting, 2012. Op cit.

Appendix 5: Occupations

Figure 21: Occupations





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