

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Queensland Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering

PeakCare's Submission to the Queensland Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering

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INTRODUCTION

PeakCare Queensland is pleased to submit our recommendations to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering. We commend the committee's commitment to examining and improving the current state of volunteering in Queensland and the value volunteering contributes, including benefits to volunteers, organisations, communities, and the State. PeakCare is the preeminent peak body for the child and family sector in Queensland and acknowledges the invaluable and critical work that our volunteer foster and kin carers undertake to keep Queensland kids in a safe and secure home. PeakCare also acknowledges the demanding work, and that such volunteers often face a financial burden in undertaking this valuable role. Through our partnership with the Queensland Family and Child Commission in 2024 we developed [Preserving a vital system: The Future of Foster Care Demographics Insight report](#) which offers actionable opportunities to revitalise the foster care system, emphasising the importance of targeted recruitment, improved support systems, and greater flexibility for potential carers. Our submission focuses on these key actions.

Better support for Foster Carers

- Adequate Foster Carer Support: Increase financial support for foster carers to alleviate the cost burdens that deter prospective foster carers. This includes increasing allowances to meet the actual cost of care and Superannuation for foster carer allowances.
- Adequate Agency Support: Undertake a national baseline of foster carer support costs to identify opportunities for bringing Queensland's funding arrangements into line with other states and territories.
- 'Foster Friendly' workplaces: Establish a foster care related leave entitlement for all Queensland Public sector employees, leading the way for other parts of the sector.
- Space to Care: Consider practical measures to enable more Queenslanders to open their homes to care for children e.g., foster carer rental subsidies, mortgage support, house and contents insurance rebates etc.

Innovative Models of Care

- Flexible Models: Develop more flexible and contemporary foster care models that better align with the interests, values and capacity of identified growth cohorts.
- Professionalised Models: Expand the range and availability of professionalised model of home-based care through the establishment of a multi-portfolio innovation fund which includes, philanthropic, state and federal funding sources.

Improved Approaches to recruiting Foster Carers

- Engagement with First Nations Communities: Improve place-based recruitment and support for First Nations foster carers to help keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in community and on country, if they cannot be cared for by kin for a time.
- Targeted Recruitment and Retention Strategies: Use the demographic insights from this report to tailor recruitment and retention efforts towards the carer personas with the greatest growth trajectories and align messaging with identified generational value sets.

- **Systemic Reform:** Immediately undertake a comprehensive overhaul of Queensland's foster care recruitment and retention strategies to address the identified demographic tightening over the next 10-years.
- **Statewide visibility:** Facilitate statewide visibility of foster carer enquiries and conversions to assist in place-based recruitment and retention strategies that are guided by demographic and service demand forecasts.

ABOUT PEAKCARE

PeakCare is a not-for-profit peak body for child and family services in Queensland, providing an independent voice representing and promoting matters of interest to the non-government sector. Across Queensland, PeakCare has more than 100 members including small, medium, and large, local, state-wide, and national non-government organisations which provide prevention and early intervention, generic, targeted, and intensive family support to children, young people, families, and communities. Member organisations also provide child protection services, foster care, kinship care and residential care for children and young people who are at risk of entry to, or who are in the statutory child protection system and youth justice systems. A large network of associate members and supporters also subscribe to PeakCare. This includes individuals with an interest in child protection, youth justice and related services, and who are supportive of PeakCare's policy platform around the rights and entitlements of children, young people and their families to safety, wellbeing, and equitable access to life opportunities.

PEAKCARE'S SUBMISSION

Background of a Volunteer Foster Carer

In Queensland generous people open their homes to care for children who are unable to be cared for by their own families. These children very often have complex needs, come from backgrounds of trauma including having been exposed to drug and substance abuse and domestic and family violence. These volunteers take children into their homes, provide a safe and secure space for them, support them with food and clothing and access to school and extracurricular activities, include them on family holidays, and provide a home environment for these children to grow up in.

Whilst foster carers do receive an allowance to provide for some of the costs incurred in providing care of the child/ren they are paid retrospectively meaning carers are often out of pocket until the allowance is paid. Foster carers are often a forgotten cohort of volunteers in Queensland as they are not seen as 'traditional' volunteers. PeakCare would like to highlight this cohort to the committee.

Better support for Carers

[The State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 report](#) by Volunteering Queensland reveals the benefits of volunteering significantly outweigh the costs, resulting in a substantial return that enriches the whole community. For every dollar invested in volunteering, there is an economic return of \$4.70. What we also know for the child and family sector is that investment in early interventions and preventions have a significant return on investment for government and communities. The New South Wales Government Brighter Beginnings: The First 2000 days of life, found investing in early childhood intervention programs produces a return on investment of \$13

for every \$1 invested. Children who develop within nurturing environments are more likely to become happy and productive members of society. The evidence is clear; early intervention is smart investment ([PeakCare Election Commitments](#), p. 8).

Volunteering Queensland's 2024 report showed that "although volunteering is time willingly given, volunteering is not free to undertake. Both volunteers and volunteers involving organisations incur direct and often significant expenses. This report estimates that the average cost for a person to volunteer is \$15.57 per hour (tripled from \$4.76 per hour in 2020). The average cost incurred by organisations utilising volunteers is \$5.09 per volunteer hour. Positively, volunteers have reported an increase in the amount that they are reimbursed for their out-of-pocket expenses. In 2020, volunteers on average were reimbursed only 11.4 per cent of their out-of-pocket expenses. This has increased to 21.0% in the 2022-23 financial year. This is a significant and important increase as the cost of volunteering was cited as a major barrier for Queenslanders wanting to volunteer."

The Future of Foster Care report (p.11) found that Australia has witnessed a notable rise in the number of children and young people entering out-of-home care over the past five years. Concurrently, the number of new foster carers has dwindled, and many existing foster carers are exiting the system. This imbalance has led to more children being placed in non-family-based care, such as residential care.

As at 30 June 2023, the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#) (AIHW) reported:

- The numbers of children and young people entering residential care has increased by 72 per cent since 2017.
- The number of foster care households available has either remained static or decreased in most jurisdictions.
- The number of foster care households exiting the system has remained static or increased in most jurisdictions.

These trends are realising globally and across all jurisdictions at different paces. Despite strong population growth, Queensland is facing a shortage of traditional foster carers. This issue is not due to ineffective marketing campaigns but rather, because of demographic tightening. A systemic overhaul of Queensland's foster care sector will be needed to counter the alarming shrinkage of the pool of available foster carers.

Innovative Models of Care

Many foster carers invest their own financial resources into providing care. Due to rising costs of living, Queensland's middle and lower-class households often do not perceive themselves as having additional resources to spare. With the number of spare bedrooms declining across the state, adding another person to the household may be seen as impractical, especially if space is limited.

Over the past four decades, more households have relied on dual incomes, resulting in fewer households where one parent, traditionally the mother, is home most of the time. Financial pressures also lead to fewer available hours in the day, with potential foster carers feeling they may not have the time to adequately meet the needs of children in their care.

The sector supports the decrease in carers, and highlighted common quotes heard from foster carers as to the reason for leaving, including:

"Exhaustion with all the appointments"

"Seeing more carers wanting to offer short breaks and not primary"

"Increase in time needed for support, needing to be available 24/7 but can't due to needing to work"

"Increase is caring responsibility and personal health"

"Cost of living pressures. No family support to help with care, lack of support with short break care. No respite available anymore".

PeakCare agrees with Volunteering Queensland's position "that the scale and impact of volunteering have been historically undervalued and under-recognised in public discourse".

Volunteering weaves strong threads throughout the entire social fabric of Queensland's many unique and diverse communities. An estimated 64.3 per cent of Queenslanders (2,800,000 people) aged 15 years and over volunteered between July 2022 and July 2023.

There are more than 6,000 foster and kinship carer families in Queensland providing care and support for young people who need it. Thousands of incredible people are doing their part to keep children and young people safe. There are over 12,000 children and young people who are in out-of-home care in Queensland, and concerningly this number continues to grow.

The Crisafulli Government under the [Safer Children, Safer Communities Policy](#) have committed \$27 million on a professional foster carer pilot program for children with disability and complex needs currently in residential care. The pilot will be co-designed where we will see professional carers paid \$100,000 a year to support children with disabilities and complex needs. This is a positive step in looking at innovative models of care that will support foster carers.

This payment is over and above what they are receiving in allowance payments, and they will be paid superannuation, they will be valued for the professional care they give our most vulnerable children.

Improved Approaches to recruitment of Foster Carers

The State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 research finds that the economic value of volunteering in Queensland was over \$117 billion in the 2022-23 financial year. While volunteering is not done for financial gain, the benefits can be quantified. This is the sum of commercial benefits (\$22.8 billion), individual benefits (\$54.5 billion), and civic benefits (\$40.5 billion). The civic benefits include the cost to replace the labour that volunteers contribute to Queensland, estimated at \$31.3 billion. If Queenslanders who wish to volunteer were better supported, this report estimates that the State of Queensland could realise over \$10 billion more in benefits over the next three years.

Queensland's workforce is undergoing a large shift, with fewer workers earning middle-income wages and more earning higher wages. This erosion of the middle class, coupled with rising living costs, could mean that only higher-income earners may perceive themselves as having the financial flexibility to take on additional caring responsibilities.

The restructuring of Queensland's workforce poses challenges for the recruitment of foster carers. Higher-income earners, who are more likely to have financial flexibility, increasingly live in different geographic areas from low-income earners, who are more likely to contribute to the demand on the child protection system. This geographic division further complicates the recruitment of foster carers.

In attracting more people to volunteer as foster carers consideration needs to be given to the crucial role foster carers play in our communities, in particular the financial strain of fostering can be overwhelming. Raising the ATO tax-free allowance threshold would provide much-needed financial relief, enabling carers to better meet the needs of the children in their care. Without this support, financial insecurity forces many foster carers to reduce their working hours or accept lower-paying jobs, exacerbating gender inequality and reducing the pool of available carers. A stable financial environment for foster carers leads to a stable, nurturing home for children in need.

Despite fulfilling a parental role, foster carers are not afforded the same workplace rights as biological or adoptive parents. Changing the National Employment Standards to provide equitable leave entitlements would allow foster carers to continue in paid employment while supporting vulnerable children. This reform would ensure a more balanced and sustainable system for those who choose to foster, ultimately improving the experience and stability for the children they support.

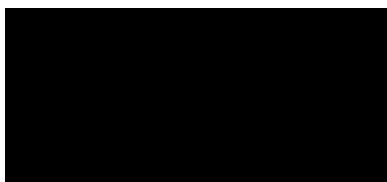
CONCLUSION

PeakCare remains steadfast in its commitment to advocating for improved opportunities for foster carers to volunteer and for better government investment to support these volunteers in the vital work of caring for children who are unsafe or unable to be cared for by their own family. Our Preserving a Vital System: The Future of Foster Care A Demographic Insight Report highlights the ten opportunities that government can consider to increase the attraction of volunteer foster carers and provides opportunities that will keep children safe.

As always, PeakCare advocates for changes to the system to be co-designed by those most impacted. As such, foster carers, foster care support agencies and young people in out-of-home care should be a key part of any decisions made about changes to legislation, policies and supports provided to volunteers in Queensland.

We thank the Parliamentary Committee for its commitment to this important work and look forward to contributing our expertise to help shape the future of volunteering for the child and family sector

Yours sincerely,



Mr Thomas Allsop
Chief Executive Officer
PeakCare Queensland Incorporated