

Dear Committee,

I am an active foster carer in Victoria. I also have permanent care of three children under a Victorian Permanent Care Order.

Please find below my thoughts on what needs to be reviewed in the broader system and what could be done.

- 1) As a society, we need to make the choice to adopt out a child a valid and caring choice for a parent to make. Especially now that an open adoption is possible, Very few babies are made available for adoption in Victoria. Thought should be given to how to set up the system to make it a good and valid choice. Most supports are designed to encourage the parent to parent. I don't see any longitudinal studies to show what happens to parents considering adoption who go on to parent and whether the parenting outcome is successful or not. I sometimes wonder if the child protection system isn't partly overflowing due to people finding themselves in a situation they didn't intend before they were ready and able and everything encourages them to give it a go without the ongoing supports to ensure that they can successfully parent.
- 2) Adoption in Victoria is only possible if the parent relinquishes the child. It also isn't available if a baby is abandoned.
- 3) It all starts with the child protection system when it comes to permanency for children.
- 4) Consider the underfunded and overwhelmed child protection systems in every state of Australia.
- 5) Consider how disparate they are and how every system is different, has different ways of interacting with the families, different courts, different orders made, different processes, etc.
- 6) It is possible for parents to lose their children under one jurisdiction and move to another and start again and find themselves interacting with child protection in a new jurisdiction with no transfer of knowledge between jurisdictions.
- 7) Consider how we also avoid another stolen generation of any background.
- 8) Consider whether each state provides the level of supports to families of origin to sustain them.
- 9) Consider whether each state actually has processes and systems backed up by good governance and reporting to ensure cases are dealt with appropriately and in a timely manner.
- 10) In Victoria, the adversarial nature of the court system seems to prolong cases rather than see them challenged and decisions made. It appears to be a system where no decision is better than making a decision.
- 11) We seem to be able to gather the states to have a unified system for natural gas and electricity in Australia but when it comes to something as important as our most vulnerable children, there is little or no co-ordination at all. I would like to see the next gathering of premiers consider making our most vulnerable children a national priority to see consistency and a national response executed.
- 12) Consider whether children are removed early enough in their trauma experience to make them adoptable. Children are becoming so complex when they enter out of home care that they are challenging to care for in the out of home care system with people with skills and experience, making it very hard to find adoptive parents for them who can meet their needs.
- 13) Consider whether the medical system in Australia allows for adequate counselling and care for these children. Most face long waitlists in the public hospital system to have their medical needs and may never have access to publicly funded mental health services. If children are to recover sufficiently from their trauma to allow adoption to be possible, then greater levels of service and higher priority on funding services for children in out of home care is needed.
- 14) In Victoria, children will not be case planned permanent care if they are considered too complex for the people in the pool of prospective permanent carers.

- 15) There are also resource constraints in Victoria on the number of people trained and assessed to be permanent carers with a backlog of people expressing interest but unable to get trained and assessed. This will also limit permanency as perm carers need to be identified before a permanent care order is made.
- 16) Consider what long term orders look like in each state. Permanent care in Victoria is arrived at by case planning permanent care as a way forward but it seems to need agreement from the parents to proceed dragging the process out over a long period of time. But many children are left on long term orders of other kinds which are easier to negotiate with the parents.
- 17) Permanent care in Victoria does not see the child have the same legal standing in the family as adoption. This is very sad. A child under a permanent care order is not automatically considered in the will of the permanent care parent. Paid parental leave and adoption leave are not available to the carers. It is very much a second class version of adoption. The child has difficulty getting a passport, difficulty proving they are Australian citizens, and difficulty changing their surname to that of the permanent care family. So many of the federal government departments contribute to the difficulties around this. This inquiry has the power to make recommendations on change to legislation to improve the rights of these children.
- 18) Feedback from people in a number of jurisdictions indicate that the systems may also have a bias against foster carers becoming the permanent carers or adoptive parents of the children they have cared for. This is also a hindrance to permanency for children as these carers know the children well and already know their challenges and how to manage them.

Regards,