

The Crime and Misconduct Commission made 110 recommendations as part of their extensive review into the Child Protection system in 2003, two of these recommendations related to reimbursement to carers for the cost of care as follows:

Recommendation 7.32

*That Foster carers receive appropriate remuneration to cover the actual costs of caring for a child, as well as receiving additional payments to attend training as required and pay the associated costs of child care and transport for such training*

Recommendation 7.34

*That the allocation of any additional payments (eg child-related expenses, high support needs allowance) be on a needs basis, rather than on regional resource allocations.*

Child Safety therefore sought to take a closer look at the allowance system and acknowledged in doing this that increases to the foster allowance had not kept pace with either the costs of living or the increased complexities of children and young people coming into care. It was recognised that this was resulting in an increased demand for Child Related Costs (CRC’s) and this had the effect of placing a strain on the administration system and carers being constantly out of pocket (Queensland Government, Child Safety: True Costs of Care Project Powerpoint 2006)

Child Safety saw the solution to this issue as reinstating the Fortnightly Caring Allowance as the primary means of carer reimbursement, therefore increasing the fostering allowance and wrapping up many of the CRC’s in this allowance. Child Safety appointed independent consultants who reviewed economic models and made recommendations to Child Safety. A financial model was selected and adapted to take into account a child in care needs being more than that of an average child in the community.

**Structure of ‘True Cost of Care’ fostering allowance**

Costs of caring benchmarked to costs for average child

+

30% of existing CRC expenditure

=

New Fortnightly Caring Allowance

+

HSNA where applicable

+

Access to all allowances and benefits available to broader community

Child Safety in partnership with FCQ went around Queensland in late 2006 to deliver Power Point Information sessions on the new structure. Carers were told that the fostering allowance for the first time would be increased every January in line with CPI index.

During these presentations, carers were also told what the Fortnightly Caring Allowance should cover and what CRC’s could be applied for that sat outside the fostering allowance, examples given of CRC’s that could be applied for included, attendance at a private school, clothing (such as consecutive placement breakdown that involves change of schools), major dental and medical outlays, assessed child care fees.

It has been 6 years since the True Cost of Care was implemented around Queensland and during this time, Queensland has seen a significant rise in the cost of living. Whilst CPI has been paid to carers, it must be noted that many of the increases in the cost of living has far exceeded the increase the CPI has provided. This was illustrated in a report released by Queensland Council of Social Services (QCOSS) in May 2011. QCOSS sought data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics which showed that whilst there had only been a 19% CPI increase in five years, that the rise to essential household costs were much higher than this. However it was the little increases and even significant decreases to the more discretionary household costs that bought the CPI down. To illustrate this further, QCOSS provided a table below:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Flat or Falling** | **% Change** | **Rising Fast** | **% Change** |
| Clothing and Footwear |  +4% | Food | +23% |
| Household appliances |  +3% | Rent | + 35% |
| Motor Vehicles | 0% | Electricity, gas & water | +63% |
| Audio, TV’s, computers | -52% | Public Transport | +48% |
|  |  | Insurance | +40% |

**Overall CPI Basket = 19 %**

FCQ acknowledges that Queensland carers in comparison to other States receive a high fostering allowance; we also acknowledge the current financial climate and therefore inability for the government at this time to review the fostering allowance in accordance with the rise in cost to living. We also accept and appreciate that the fostering allowance since 2006 has increased in line with CPI each year, which would absolutely go towards some of the increases in cost of living, however as evidenced above, it would be fair to draw some conclusions that the CPI increases have not kept up with the actual rise in living for essential household costs.

It is therefore important that in light of not being in a position to take another close look at the fostering allowance, that carers are able to access Child Related costs as set out in Departmental policy to release the financial pressure currently being felt in many foster carer homes. This report provides some insight into carers knowledge and access to Child Related Costs, which raises concerns in these areas and highlights the need for Child Safety staff to be more transparent in their communication with carers around their rights to apply for such costs.

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**DEMOGRAPHICS**

**Carer Type**

227 Carers answered this question with the overwhelming majority being foster carers.

**Carer by Region**

A total of 228 responses were received from across the Region, the majority of carers who responded came from the South East Region, however it is pleasing to see that results were received from across all seven Regions and appear to be in proportion to the amount of carers in each region.

**Carer Support**

Carers were asked to identify who they were supported by

**Do you own your own home**

**FINANCIAL QUESTIONS**

**Cost of Living**

Carers were asked a range of questions around the overall costs of living. Carers were asked to rate the impact of the rise in cost of living on them in various areas according the following criteria

1. No impact
2. Minimal Impact
3. Moderate Impact
4. Significant Impact
5. Extreme Impact

**In respect to Electricity, how has this affected your household budget**

In reading this data 71% of carers have identified that the cost in electricity has had either a significant or extreme impact on their household finances. Only 7% of carers identified the cost of electricity as having either no or minimal impact on their household budget.

**In respect to Water, how has this affected your household budget**

Whilst carers did not identify the rise in cost of water as having as much of an impact on their household budget, still 47% reported a significant or extreme impact and an overall 76% reported at least a moderate impact or higher

The Queensland Council of Social Services (QCOSS) printed a report in May 2011 which speaks to the rise in the cost of living for families in Queensland. QCOSS reported a 63% rise in the cost of Electricity, gas and water since May 2006, these statistics were drawn from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This percentage is significant and reflects why carers are finding that their household budget has been significantly impacted by the rise of Electricity and water prices.

**In respect to cost of fuel, how has this affected your household budget**

The results in respect to the cost of fuel are significant, with an overwhelming 84% of carers reporting either a significant or extreme effect on household budget and only 3% overall reporting a minimal effect, no carers reported that the rising cost of fuel has had no impact on their household budget. In researching the cost of petrol in 2005/2006 which was when the last review took place for the fostering allowance in Queensland, it must be noted that the average price of petrol in 2005 was just $1.03 and in 2006 this rose to an average of $1.18 (Queensland Treasury and Trade, archives). In 2011, motorists can expect to pay $1.40 and above for their petrol. Carers are expected to cover 250kms each week in their fostering allowance, this is 500kms a fortnight and would cost a carer an average of $60 a fortnight in petrol at $1.40 a litre. This does not take into account the additional wear and tear on the car, insurance and registration costs.

**In respect to cost of food, how has this affected your household budget**

81% of carers have reported either a significant or extreme impact in respect to the rising cost of food and impact on household, only 4% reported a minimal impact with no carers reporting no impact. According to QCOSS report (May 2011) there has been a 23% rise in the cost of food since 2005

**In respect to cost of insurance (car, house, medical), how has this affected your household budget**

66% of carers reported either a significant or extreme impact in respect to insurances. QCOSS report a 40% increase in the overall price of insurances since May 2005.

**In respect to the overall cost of living, how has this affected your household budget;**

An overwhelming 83% of carers feel that there has been a significant or extreme impact on their household budget in respect to the overall cost of living, only 4% feel there has been a minimal impact and no carers have reported no impact.

**If you are purchasing you own home (have a mortgage), what affect has interest rates had on your household budget**

**If you are renting, has rises in rent affected your household budget**

QCOSS report a 35% rise in the cost of rent since May 2005.

**Child Related Costs**

Carers were asked about their access to Child Related Costs, they were given a list of CRC’s and were asked to answer according to the following categories:

Yes Child Safety has or currently do meet this CRC

No I have applied for this CRC and was turned down

N/A This CRC is not applicable to children I have or have had in my care

Unknown I was not aware that I could apply for this CRC

The CRC’s have been broken down into categories according to CRC Policy

**Child Related Cost - Travel**

**Policy 595-4 Effective 2nd September 2010**

It is concerning the amount of carers who report not knowing that they are able to apply for CRC’s to meet costs associated with transport to carer training. It is also concerning that nearly a quarter of all carers surveyed report that they have applied for CRC’s in these areas and have been turned down. All of these costs sit outside of the fostering allowance and therefore should make up part of a case plan and be meet through CRC’s.

**Child Related Cost – Medical**

**Policy 596-3 Effective 2nd September 2010**

It is clear that many carers felt that these categories was not applicable to them, so the data was broken down further to reflect carers who felt that these CRC’s were relevant to them. The following percentages reflect carers who either did not know they could ask for the CRC or did and were turned down for it

Glasses 58.5%

Aids and equipment for children with a disability 77.6%

Ongoing medical costs not covered through a health care card 75.4%

Dental Treatment 71.5%

**Child Related Cost – Education Support**

**Policy 599-2 Effective 2nd September**

In respect to payment of tutoring, compulsory school fees and the gap for textbook and resource allowance – the majority of carers who felt these was applicable to them have stated they did not know they could apply or had requested this CRC to be met and have been turned down as follows:

Tutoring 81.8%

Gap for Textbook allowance 89.0%

Payment of compulsory school fees 82.1%

It is pleasing to see that the majority of carers when requested have had a school camp CRC met. However it is very concerning to see the high number of carers who have not had additional educational support through CRC’s.

**Child Related Cost – Client Support and Family Contact**

**Policy 598-6 Effective 2nd September 2010**

Once again, it is important that we look at the data with figures around those who felt that the CRC’s related to them, so broken down as per previous sections, the following results were received:

Vacation Care 74%

Child Care 62.5%

Birth Certificate 51.3%

Cultural Activities or events 87.6%

School Photographs 83.6%

**Summary of Child Related Costs**

It would appear from the data collected in these surveys that carers are not receiving the opportunity or being turned down for reimbursement of costs that sit outside of what carers are expected to cover in the fortnightly fostering allowance. FCQ is absolutely aware that each case is individual and that some carers would be receiving High Support Needs Allowance where negation would have occurred that some CRC’s are met with the additional funds provided with this allowance. However we must acknowledge these percentages and ensure that carers have knowledge about what they can apply for and if the Manager makes a decision to turn down a request for a CRC this should be accompanied with a rational.

**What carers consider to be important CRC’s**

Finally, carers were asked to list the top five CRC’s that they consider would make a difference in their home if paid for, there were a wide range of answers, which we have placed into categories

187 carers answered this particular question – 42 skipped it. As each carer was requested to list five, there are multiple answers and a total of 692

Medical/Dental 108

Travel 108

Schooling (fees, uniforms, text books) 98

Sporting/Recreation/Ex-curriculum activities 69

Child Care 65

Specialist Appointments 45

Tutoring 28

Vacation Care 27

Clothing (additional allowances) 26

Cost of living (Electricity/Water/food assistance) 34

School Camps 23

Assistance with family holidays/activities 21

Glasses 11

Disability Aids 11

Repairs to home and furniture 11

Cleaners 4

Overwhelming – carers listed assistance with medical, travel, schooling, sporting/recreation and child care as the five main areas where they would like further financial assistance with.