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Trend Paper

ifoster2: The Changing Face of Fostering in Australia

Introduction

Australian society has evolved rapidly over the past thirty years. With this change has come greater and greater need for out-of-home care¹ for vulnerable Australian youth: the number of children in out-of-home care in New South Wales increased by 23.9 per cent to 18,169 between 2008 and 2012². Around half of these children and young people were placed into foster care with most of the rest placed with extended family. Over thirty per cent of these children and young people were from Aboriginal backgrounds. At the same time, traditional methods of out-of-home care are under threat, squeezed by fewer stay-at-home mums and more stay-at-home kids. Foster care is changing in response, developing innovative new models and appealing to new pools of potential carers.

Based on interviews with leading authorities on Australian society and foster care, and data from research bodies, this paper explores the quiet revolution taking place in foster care and reveals its changing face.



Key Points

- The traditional Australian family has changed dramatically over the past 30 years
- The face of foster care is changing in response
 - More and more same-sex couples are fostering
 - People are becoming foster carers at an older age
 - Working parents are looking at fostering in different ways to suit their lifestyle
 - Singles are more likely now to foster than couples
 - Aboriginal and other children from culturally diverse backgrounds are increasingly being placed with culturally appropriate carers
- There is an urgent need for more foster carers in NSW, with 900 new carers needed over the next two years
- Non-government organisations (NGOs), not the Government, now have responsibility for recruiting foster carers. These agencies are finding new, flexible ways to foster, and are targeting new groups, like same-sex couples, younger adults and empty nesters (especially for respite).
- ACWA, the peak body for NGOs out-of-home care providers in NSW, is for the first time co-ordinating a state-wide campaign on behalf of the NGO sector
 - ACWA is marketing to new population groups, suggesting they 'Open Their Hearts' and foster a child.
- The NSW Government is transitioning the provision of foster care to the NGO sector. This makes the NSW foster care sector well placed to adjust to changing circumstances and develop a foster care model fit for the 21st Century.

Footnotes:

¹Out of home care refers to the placement of children away from their parents, due to concern that they are at risk of significant harm

²NSW Government, Family & Community Services, Annual Statistical Report 2011/12



Changes in Australian Society; Implications for Fostering

The availability of foster carers in Australia is driven by a number of disparate factors, from social perceptions through to average age of childbirth and even the availability of spare bedrooms.

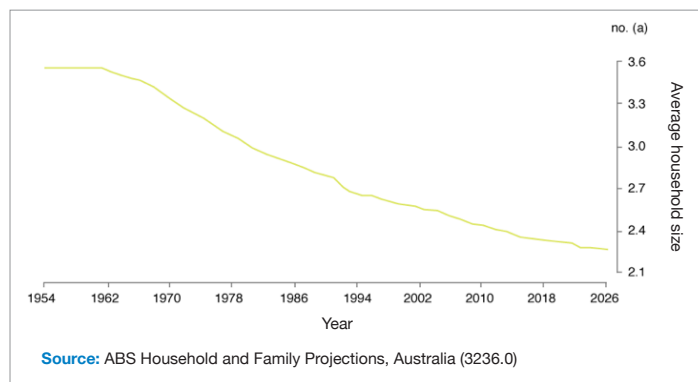
Key among these influences are changes to Australian families. Professor Alan Hayes, Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies puts it succinctly: “the way Australians ‘do’ family is changing”.

These changes are having a significant impact on foster care. There are seven key trends:

1. Size: The Shrinking Australian Family

In line with global trends, Australian families are getting smaller. The number of women who have had four or more children by the age of 40–44 has fallen dramatically: from 28% in 1981 to just over 10% in 2006. At the same time the number of women with a single child increased almost doubled from 8% to 13%. Table 1 shows just how much the Australian family is shrinking.

Table 1: Average household size 1954 to 2026 (projected)



“The way Australians ‘do’ family is changing”

Professor Alan Hayes, Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies

As Professor Hayes points out, this trend does mask some variations among different ethnic groups. However, the proportion of women in their early forties who are childless has also increased, from 9% in 1981 to 16% in 2007.

There are several reasons for smaller family sizes, which are typically correlated to increasing levels of wealth. As living standards rise, so do expectations for the resources devoted to raising a child. This is increasingly prohibitive: the Federal Government estimates that it costs around \$380,000 to raise an Australian child to 18; some researchers say the cost may be closer to \$1 million³.

In addition, an increase in Australia’s divorce rate (44% of Australian marriages ended in divorce in 1999, compared to 36% in 1979) is also likely to be contributing to more, smaller families. This poses a number of challenges for foster care. Traditionally, a number of foster placements were with families that already had children. The shrinking Australian family and an increasing sense that ‘two is enough’ has placed pressure on this approach. Smaller families may feel less willing to take on a foster child. Finally, lone parents may feel they have less ability to foster an additional child, given the constraints that already exist on their time.

The New Arrangements for Fostering in NSW

In the past few months, there has been a quiet revolution in the way that foster care is handled in New South Wales. In November 2011 the NSW Government formally decided to transfer all children and young people in out-of-home care to NGOs, including all foster care children to 53 NGOs. The move to transfer services to the non-government sector was a key recommendation in the Wood Special Commission of Inquiry into NSW Child Protection Services in 2008, acknowledging that NGOs were best placed to provide and achieve better outcomes for children and young people.

This change may be administrative. But the benefits are human: as a result of the changes, carers and children will be seen more frequently by case workers than before. The agencies, which are on the frontline of fostering, are able to use their direct experience to improve the fostering experience both for foster children and for carers. They are

able to explore more flexible, lateral and creative options for children, young people and families.

This is particularly true for Aboriginal care, which has seen a similar devolution of responsibility from the state to AbSec, a dedicated peak body for Aboriginal out-of-home care agencies. This is critical in resolving the mistrust of state care of children that lingers following the experiences of the Stolen Generation. As Angela Webb, CEO of AbSec notes, Aboriginal carers are more likely to be persuaded to sign up to an Aboriginal foster care agency than a government body.

Andrew McCallum, CEO of the Association of Children’s Welfare Agencies, says the transfer of services heralds a new dawn in foster care in New South Wales. While the path of change will not be easy or immediate, the benefits for foster care, and for Australian society, will be felt for many years to come.



There are opportunities within this trend. Smaller families may have more space in their home for another child, and a willingness over time to expand their family. While some may be reluctant to foster a child over a long period, short-term fostering may instead be attractive for some families.

The increasing propensity of Australian adults to live by themselves is a positive development for fostering. Interestingly, single adults in New South Wales are more likely to foster than couples (though the majority of foster carers are still couple families, because of their greater number). This proportion increased substantially between 1986 and 2003.⁴

2. Age of Childbirth

Part of the reason for the shrinking Australian family is that (despite improvements in assisted reproduction) women are looking at a smaller 'childbirth window'. In 1980, the most

common age of first childbirth was the early twenties, but the proportion of women giving birth in their early thirties more than doubled over this period to become the most common age for childbirth in 2007 (28% of women gave birth at this age).

Professor Elizabeth Fernandez of the School of Social Sciences at UNSW attributes this to two key factors: Australians taking longer to commit to relationships, and an increasing focus by women on their career aspirations, a trend that has received a lot of media attention in recent times.

This trend can be seen clearly in the data: more women now give birth in their late thirties than in their teenage years. The proportion of women giving birth in their late thirties increased sixfold from 1980 to 2007, from 2% to 12%⁵.

Simply put, Australians are devoting less of their lifespan to child-rearing. This has created a foster care 'time squeeze'.

Aboriginal Foster Care: A Unique Challenge

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children comprise 4.9% of all children aged 0-17 years in Australia, yet in 2010-11 they constituted nearly 33% of all children placed in out-of-home care.

While many of these children are placed with relatives, others are not. The 'Aboriginal Placement Principle' dictates that Aboriginal children should ideally be placed with Aboriginal carers. Dana Clarke, Chairperson of the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat of NSW (AbSec), says that there has been greater success in implementing this policy in recent times, but with this has come an acute shortage of Aboriginal carers.

Clarke observes that because of the impact of the Stolen Generation, when around 100,000 Aboriginal children were removed from across Australia, there can be a wariness of the concept of foster care in Aboriginal communities. Angela Webb, CEO of AbSec concurs: "This issue is still raw in people's minds. Trust needs rebuilding".

"Aboriginal communities have come together to care for children for tens of thousands of years"

Dana Clarke, Chairperson, AbSec



Wayne Carroll, a Case Manager from Anglicare / Miyagan Aboriginal Out of Home Care Service notes, the transfer of responsibility for case management from the Government to Aboriginal foster agencies is a positive development, as potential carers are likely to feel more relaxed and supported. Moreover, as victims of the Stolen Generation may not have been 'parented' themselves, they may lack certain parenting skills and be more likely to have their children taken into out of home care.

Garry Matthews, CEO of the Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Family Community Care Centre emphasises the importance of Aboriginal children in foster care remaining connected to their country, and having regular contact with their community. More Aboriginal carers are needed, at a time when changing generational attitudes towards community service make this challenging. Lester Moran from Ngunyajarjurn, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait out of home care provider agrees, noting this needs to be done in such a way that it does not place an undue burden on local communities.



On the one hand, the window for fostering at young ages is closing, as people choose to delay creating families. On the other, the window for fostering at older ages (which often occurs when children grow up and leave home) is also closing, as potential carers are still caring for their own children at a later age. Associate Professor Judith Cashmore, from Sydney Law School, notes that older Australians are less likely to be in their 50s, and more likely to be in their 60s, when they feel that they have enough spare time on their hands to foster.

There is another perspective on this. Women who decide to raise children later in life (potentially older than an age at which they can have children) may increasingly see foster care as an avenue to parenthood. This would represent a new potential pool of carers, and is an example of how changes in societal norms present new opportunities as well as challenges for foster care.

3. Make-up: The End of 'One Size Fits All' Families

As Emeritus Professor Bettina Cass from UNSW's Social Policy Research Centre puts it: "Australian families are becoming more and more fluid; nuclear families still exist but blended families are more and more common". In 1976, almost half of Australian families were the archetypal 'couple with dependent children'. This number has fallen dramatically, with a growth in the number of less traditional living arrangements.

For example, almost a third of children are now being born outside of marriage: fully 34% of Australian children were born outside marriage in 2008, compared to 12% in 1980.

“Australian families are becoming more and more fluid”

Emeritus Professor Bettina Cass, UNSW

At the same time, the proportion of lone parents has doubled, rising to 21% in 2008, meaning one in five Australians now grow up with a single parent.⁶ This has implications for the traditional foster care model, which relied on placing children in nuclear families.

This model of foster care is coming under pressure and the pool of traditional families is shrinking at the same time that the number of children needing care is increasing. This is leading foster care agencies to look to new groups to support foster care needs towards 2020 and beyond.

One new pool that is increasingly proving to be a successful source is same-sex couples. There has also been a huge increase in the number of same-sex couples, up 32% in the five years between the 2006 and 2011 census alone.

Young Australians are 16 times more likely to be in a same-sex relationship than older Australians

ABS data

Same-sex couples will likely form an increasingly important part of the foster care base into the future: as a proportion of total couples, for every same-sex couple aged over 65, there are sixteen same-sex couples aged 15-24 coming through the demographic ranks⁷. These are the carers of the future.

Although some agencies do not place foster children with same-sex couples, others are seeing see huge potential in this growth area. There are also a number of Aboriginal same-sex couples fostering children, helping to support an area of high carer demand.

4. Working status: Stay at Home Mum Stops Staying at Home

According to Emeritus Professor Bettina Cass, the widespread move of mothers into the labour force over the past few decades is one of the single most significant changes to the Australian family.

In 1981, a minority (43%) of mothers with dependent children were in paid work. By 2009, this had changed dramatically, with working motherhood the norm (63% of mothers). Nowadays, the most likely scenario is for couple parents to have a full-time and a part-time job between them. The proportion of couple parents with two full-time jobs also increased, from 17% in 1983 to 25% in 2009⁸.

If there is one single trend that poses a challenge for foster care, it is this. 'Mum' is spending more time at work, not at home, during the day. Females have traditionally been the mainstay of foster care. This, together with increasingly busy schedules, means less and less time is available for taking care of foster children.

Footnotes:

⁶Australian Institute of Family Studies (2010); Families Then and Now

⁷Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) Same-sex Couple Families

⁸Australian Institute of Family Studies (2010); Families Then and Now



There is, however, another perspective on this. Few foster carers choose to foster in order to access the compensation available (which is an allowance to cover the costs of the child's care, not a wage). Professor Elizabeth Fernandez from the School of Social Sciences at UNSW notes that foster care may provide enough additional financial incentive for some mothers to stay home (rather than go to work) and look after their own children as well as fostered children.



5. Less than Empty Nests: Why won't they leave?

One group that is staying at home is younger Australians. Driven in part by the rising cost of accommodation, young Australians are living with their parents for longer. In 1981, 34% of Australians aged 20-24 lived with their parents. By 1999, this figure had increased to 49%⁹. As Associate Professor Judith Cashmore from Sydney Law School notes, it is also often the case that children actually return to the nest, particularly in the case of a marriage breakdown.

“There is an increasing level of grandparent care in Australian families”

Professor Elizabeth Fernandez, School of Social Sciences, UNSW

Further, grandparents are increasingly taking an active role in the raising of their own children's children, leaving less opportunity for a foster care role. As Tina McGhie from the Illawarra Aboriginal Corporation notes, this is particularly the case in Aboriginal communities. While grandparent and community care for children has been undertaken in Aboriginal communities for thousands of years, the burden of expectation is placing increasing strains on communities.

The fact that many older foster carers choose to wait until their children leave home before exploring foster care means that the trend for less empty nests poses challenges for foster care. Together with the trend to have children at a later age, it means that Australian parents are increasingly older by the time their own children leave home. This carries the risk that they consider themselves too old to foster.

Speaking of nests, a more prosaic trend is also good news for fostering. Foster care doesn't just require space in your heart: you also need room in your home. Although we may feel that increasing housing prices have made us downsize, the opposite is true. Between 1976 and 2010, the average number of bedrooms per dwelling increased from 2.8 to 3.1; at the same time the number of persons per households declined from 3.1 to 2.6¹⁰. Using a Canadian methodology, the ABS estimates that 79% of Australian households had a spare bedroom in 2010¹¹. The positive news is that if someone is willing to be a foster carer, they are increasingly likely to have the space to do so.

6. Cultural Diversity

Almost one in every four Australians are now born overseas. The sources of migration are changing, and bringing different approaches to family, and different perspectives on foster care. The UK was previously Australia's most common source of migration, but more migrants now come from India and China than the UK¹².

Australia's increasingly rich cultural diversity brings new challenges, and new opportunities for foster care. As Professor Hayes from the Australian Institute of Family Studies notes, different cultural groups often have different norms in relation to family size and composition. For example, many cultures have larger family sizes. Once in Australia, specific communities may feel an additional responsibility to look after vulnerable children from their society. This is positive news for foster care.

However, it also poses challenges. With an increasing emphasis on children to be cared for by culturally matched carers, foster care agencies have to look at smaller, more tightly defined pools of potential carers. Almost half of Australians (43 per cent) have at least one overseas-born parent, and over 260 languages are spoken in Australia¹³. For a child who has been placed into foster care, the situation can be alienating and challenging. Having carers who can provide cultural and linguistic familiarity is a major advantage for that child's stability and welfare.

Footnotes:

⁹Australian Bureau of Statistics (2000) Living Arrangements: Young Adults in the Parental Home

¹⁰Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) Housing Utilisation

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) Cultural Diversity in Australia



7. Time poverty

Who has time to foster children? Australians feel that their lives are busier than ever. The ABS started collecting time use data relatively recently. This reinforces the view that we have less time on our hands: free time fell slightly between 1997 and 2006¹⁴. In contrast, the amount of time mothers spent in paid work increased by 3.7 hours per week between 1992 and 2006¹⁵.

“Time is one of things that we don’t have enough of, and it impacts our willingness to foster”

Dr Marilyn McHugh, Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW

Lack of time is an important factor in today’s society, according to Dr Marilyn McHugh from the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW. People who might consider foster care are concerned about the time commitment involved. They may not be aware of less time-intensive foster care options.

Of course, we have the same number of hours in our day that we always had; the difference is in how we spend it. We spend more time in traffic, more time at the gym, and more time playing Angry Birds on our iPads. We feel busier.

Foster care is rewarding, but it is also time-consuming. While people may be well-disposed to the prospect of fostering a child, they simply do not believe they have enough time. This is likely to continue to be a brake on foster care recruitment. Many Australians would be more likely to foster children if they were aware of the variety of flexible options which are compatible with busy lifestyles, such as weekend respite (or short break) fostering. Foster care is changing in response, creating new, more flexible models of care to ensure enough foster carers can continue to be found.

Looking forward: the next 10 years

Change in foster care arrangements, such as looking at new pools of carer, is essential if foster care is to continue to attract the number of carers that we need to look after Australia’s vulnerable children. More and more carers are coming from all walks of life and do not just fit the traditional ‘family’ mould. Increasingly fostering families come in all shapes and sizes – in just the same way Australian families do.

The challenges posed by the six trends identified in this paper mean that fostering needs to constantly adapt – as Dr Marilyn McHugh from UNSW’s Social Policy Research Centre put it, “if you don’t look for foster carers that reflect Australian society, you won’t have any”.

Unfortunately, the number of children needing foster care is not declining. According to Dr McHugh, this has been driven both by improvements in mandatory reporting (so more cases are being picked up) and on-the-ground realities (such as an increase in substance abuse).

The good news is that the increasing acceptance of different configurations of family represents a great opportunity for foster care. It means people are increasingly open to different family approaches, and potentially to including a foster child in their family mix. It opens up new groups that may not have previously considered fostering.

“It’s not enough to just want to be a foster carer – people’s circumstances need to be right for that place and time”

Dr Marilyn McHugh, Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW

We asked a number of experts their view on how fostering will change in the next 10 years. Their overriding message was that foster families will evolve to reflect the increasing diversity of family life in Australia. They emphasised that if fostering did not evolve to be suitable to these new family configurations, that the shortage of foster carers would be even more pronounced.

“Grandparents will play a more active role in fostering, as they are doing with kids today”

Professor Alan Hayes, Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies



Footnotes:

¹³Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) Cultural Diversity in Australia

¹⁴Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) How Australians Use Their Time

¹⁵Craig et al. (2010) Parenthood, policy and work-family time in Australia 1992-2006



For example, there is a widespread view that the age profile of carers will increase. Just as Australians are having children at a later and later age, so too are they likely to be older when they foster. This reflects changes already underway in the 'ageing' of the average foster carer (in 1986 the average age profile was 25-49; by 2003 this was 35-54¹⁶). Recruitment of potential foster carers needs to consider older demographics as well as focusing on younger carers.

“There will be more single parent fostering, and more same-sex couple fostering”

Emeritus Professor Bettina Cass, UNSW

Associate Professor Judith Cashmore, from Sydney Law School believes that more flexible fostering arrangements are important both for foster children and for foster parents. There is increasing recognition of the need to provide support to families who are struggling to raise children, as well as the children themselves – sometimes an early intervention with a short-term foster period, rather than a long-term foster arrangement, may be the ideal response for a child. This works well with today's busy lifestyles. More creative, flexible fostering arrangements can be a win/win for both children and potential foster carers alike.

When a return to a child's birth family appears an unlikely option, more consideration is now also being given to adoption as a pathway to creating stable and permanent care. This will suit some population groups who look to foster care as a means to creating a family.

Our experts identified a growing need for a more professional approach to foster care, recognising the complexities of both of the needs of foster children, and the desirability of including foster parents in the decisions around the children in their care as much as possible. Increasing recognition that foster carers drawn from the caring professions such as teachers, nurses and social workers, are more suited to providing the type of care needed for more complex foster care requirements.

Garry Matthews, CEO of the Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Family Community Care Centre, which places carers with children, notes that the increasingly high standard of care being sought means that training and contact requirements are becoming more and more stringent, making the prospect of being a carer seem more daunting for some. Balancing the need for more stringent professional requirements with ensuring the carer experience is not too onerous to prevent carers volunteering will be critical to the success of foster care in Australia.

Three Myths about Foster Care

MYTH: Foster carers are not like us

FACT: Australians who are unfamiliar with foster care have a tendency to view foster carers as angels or demons – either selfless individuals who have sacrificed more than can be imagined for the good of society, or selfish people who mistreat children. This latter view has been perpetrated by negative images of foster care in movies, television and popular fiction.

In fact, while there are particular qualities that mark out great foster parents, the majority of foster carers are everyday Australians who simply want the opportunity to contribute to the raising of a child. Families at the extremities of the Australian income distribution (i.e. the poorest and richest) are in fact the least likely to foster.

MYTH: Foster care and adoption are totally separate

FACT: Foster care and adoption meet the same fundamental need and are both forms of out-of-home care. In some cases, fostering a child can lead to adoption. This is particularly attractive to new groups of foster parent, such as same-sex couples, who are looking to fostering as a way of including parenting in their lives.

There is a new focus from government for the adoption process to be made as accessible as possible, while retaining necessary checks and safeguards. Where children and young people are unable to be restored to their parents, decisions need to be made earlier to provide maximum stability. This includes looking at ways to make adoption by carers easier and quicker.

MYTH: Foster care is a 24/7 commitment

FACT: There are several different types of fostering, including part time or respite fostering, where a child's usual foster parents are given a break by another foster parent. Typically, this could be once a month or over a weekend. A commitment to foster care does not mean a full-time commitment: there are many ways to foster, and many ways to make fostering fit with today's busy lifestyles.

To learn more about foster care, visit <http://www.fosteringnsw.com.au/>



“We need to be creative with fostering, and look for win/win situations that suit both the child and carer”

Associate Professor Judith Cashmore,
Sydney Law School

While many aspects of fostering mimic traditional parenting skills, the particular challenges for children in foster care demand additional qualities of foster parents. These include a protecting and nurturing attitude, an ability to meet a child's specific developmental needs, a willingness to support a child's relationship with their birth family, providing a sense of permanency and the ability to work as a part of a team (with social workers)¹⁷.

Despite the changes to Australian families and society, the underlying characteristics of a great foster carer remain unchanged. Professor Alan Hayes of the Australian Institute of Family Studies has identified six key characteristics of a high-performing foster carer:

- 1. A sense of love**
- 2. Warm attachments**
- 3. Consistency of parenting practice**
- 4. Stability**
- 5. Financial and material support**
- 6. Successful transmission of 'pro-social' values**

These characteristics are not dependent on one particular type of family arrangement. As Australian society evolves, foster care needs to evolve, but always remain focused on what is important for foster children. Amidst all the change, this is the constant that matters.

Conclusion

Australian society is rapidly evolving, and foster care with it. This brings challenges, but also opportunities. The recent changes in New South Wales that have provided NGOs with the responsibility for foster care will allow the sector to respond innovatively to the changing pool of potential carers in Australia.

This means it will be important to actively reach out to new audiences, such as single Australians, same-sex couples and people who may want to foster with a view to adoption. Most importantly, it means keeping foster care relevant to Australian society, and to the needs of the children it exists to help.





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Expert Interviews

Expert interviews to inform this paper were carried out with the following:

Emeritus Professor Bettina Cass, Social Policy Research Centre, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences University of New South Wales

Ms Dana Clarke, CEO, Burrun Dalai Aboriginal Corporation and Chairperson, Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat of NSW (AbSec)

Mr Wayne Carroll, Case Manager, Anglicare / Miyagan Out of Home Care

Associate Professor Judith Cashmore, Sydney Law School, University of Sydney

Professor Elizabeth Fernandez, School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales

Professor Alan Hayes, Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies

Mr Garry Matthews, CEO, Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Family Community Care Centre

Ms Tina McGhie, Illawarra Aboriginal Corporation

Dr Marilyn McHugh, Social Policy Research Centre, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of New South Wales

Mr Lester Moran, Manager, Case Workers, Ngunyajarjum

Angela Webb, CEO, Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (NSW) (AbSec)

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