

In 2016, as part of the ACT Government Out-of-Home Care strategy, *A Step Up for Our Kids*, the ACT Together consortium (Barnardos Australia, the Australian Childhood Foundation and OzChild) formed to provide all out-of-home care services for children in the ACT. ACT Together's contract expired 31 December 2024. This marks a transition to a new service system, without the consortium.

Under the ACT Government's new strategy, *Next Steps for Our Kids, a Children, Young People & Families Panel* has been established. Each organisation within the ACT Together consortium has been successfully appointed as a panel provider but will now operate independently.

The establishment of a consortium to deliver out-of-home care services was an innovative and bold approach, unprecedented anywhere else in Australia. By uniting three organisations with extensive expertise, the consortium provided seamless therapeutic care for children and families involved in out-of-home care. This collaborative model significantly reduced systemic barriers to meeting the needs of children throughout their time in care. It also brought about a marked improvement in compliance and oversight functions, enhancing safety and outcomes for vulnerable children.

Throughout the lifespan of the ACT Together consortium, countless lives have been transformed. With the invaluable support of our foster and kinship carers, ACT Together has facilitated the safe reunification of children with their parents, connected children with extended family through family finding, matched children with their forever families, and supported pathways to Enduring Parental Responsibility (EPR) or Open Adoption. ACT Together also established a Community Adolescent Program focussing on ensuring that young people have the independent skills, resources and support to transition out of care successfully.

Penny Ball and her family became foster carers in 2017. Since that time, they have supported the restoration of 13 children to their parents or family. Penny says *'fostering babies involves giving your whole heart in an expression of unconditional love and compassion. The heartwarming joy of experiencing and documenting their milestones like first smiles, giggles or steps fills our hearts with joy and a deep sense of fulfilment. There's pride in knowing we are making a significant difference in a child's life, but also humility in recognising the role we play in a much larger picture. Our family has grown much larger because of the new relationships we have formed with the families of children who have been in our care.'*



Where restoration is not possible and the courts determine a child to be subject to a care and protection order until they are 18 years of age, where appropriate we seek to exit them out of the out-of-home care system through EPR or Open Adoption. Over the course of the consortium, ACT Together achieved 39 Adoption orders and 109 EPR provisions.

As the General Manager for ACT Together, Kate Buckmaster reflects that she is proud of the many accomplishments achieved by the consortium. While there are many, her top four are:

- Significantly enhanced the experience of kinship carers ensuring equal access to the same support provided to foster carers.
- The introduction of the Community Adolescent Program to cater to the needs of young people 16 years of age and over to successfully transition to independence.
- The genuine integration of trauma-responsive therapeutic care across all programs in the consortium and provision of high-quality therapeutic supports and services to children, and their families and carers.
- At the commencement of the consortium there were 43 children and young people living in residential care. At the time the consortium ceased providing residential care we had reduced that number to 28 by supporting transitions to home-based care or supported independent living arrangements.



From 1 January 2025, the Australian Childhood Foundation, Barnardos Australia and OzChild will continue their work, improving the lives of Canberran children, independently.

To learn more about the work of Barnardos Australia in Canberra or to become a foster carer with Barnardos Australia click here <https://www.barnardos.org.au/>

To learn more about the work of the Australian Childhood Foundation click here <https://www.childhood.org.au/>

To learn more about the work of OzChild or to become a foster carer with OzChild click here <https://www.ozchild.org.au/>