

## Carer Support Team Annual Results 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2023

The former Carer Information and Support Service (CISS) name has changed to **Carer Support Team**, reflecting the growth of the **3 program streams** offered to carers at the FCAV.

### 1. Carer Advocates (Foster care enquiries)

- Provides information and advice to foster carers about navigating the Out of Home Care System
- Provides support and advocacy for foster carers involved in a Client Incident Management System (CIMS)
- Liaison with foster carer’s agency, when necessary, to advocate for foster carers
- Liaison with DFFH and other key stakeholders for individual advocacy.

### 2. Learning and Development

The Learning and Development stream offers a range of forums with a focus on helping carers to meet the complex needs of the children in their care but also ensuring their own self-care is prioritised. Forums include webinars, cultural days, art therapy and Chats with the CEO.

### 3. Carer Assistance Program (CAP)

This program provides an additional service of therapeutic support, aimed at improving the mental health and wellbeing of foster carers, permanent carers and adoptive parents. Delivered one-to-one, as couples or group therapeutic settings, on issues such as:

- Anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation
- Grief and loss
- Emotional support during a CIMS
- System stress and placements break down
- Thoughts of exiting the system
- Relationship conflict
- Parenting challenges
- Relinquishment of child.

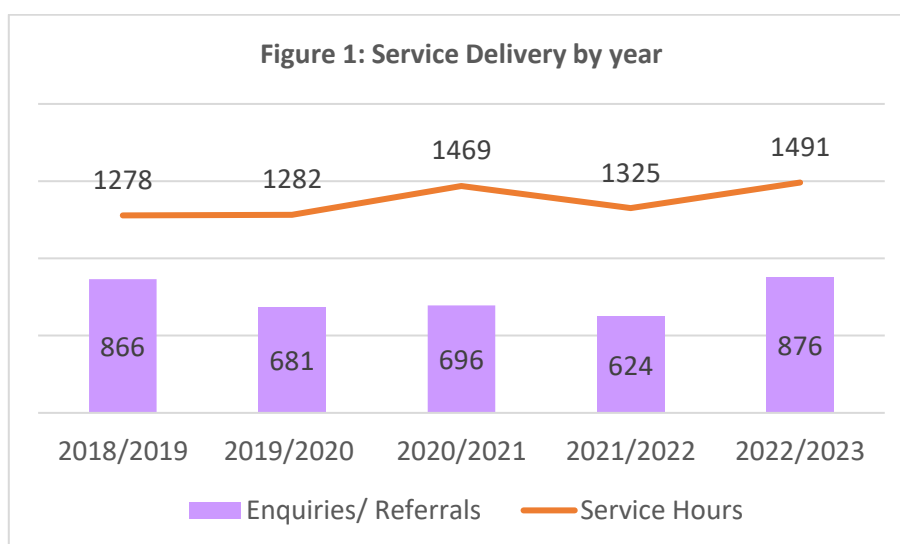
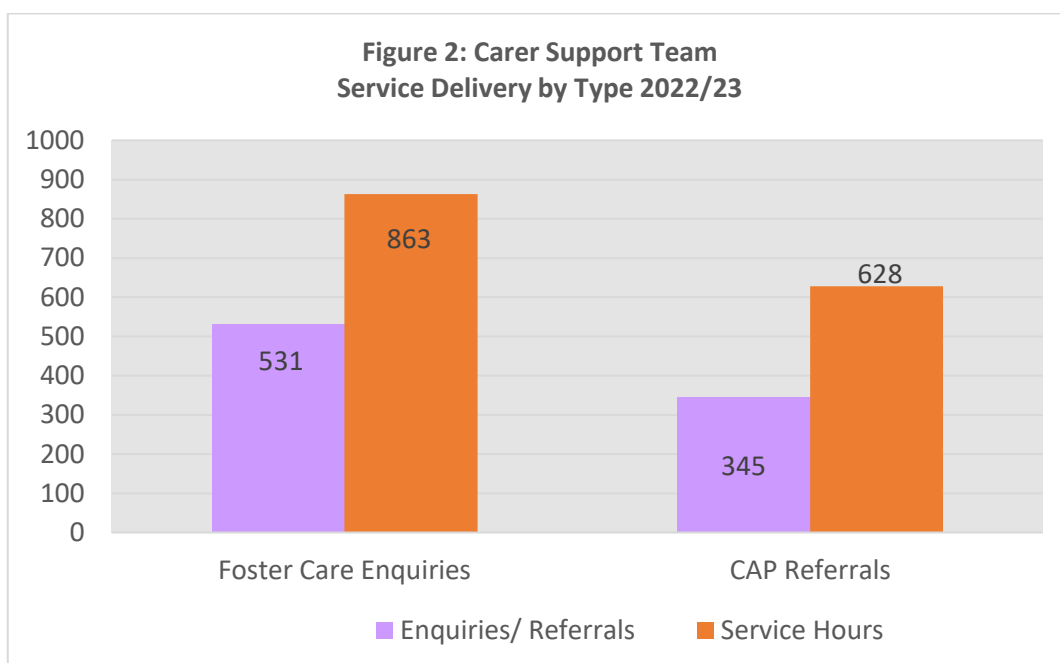


Figure 1 shows the number of enquiries (including CAP referrals) is the highest in the past 5 years. There are several reasons for the increase in service delivery. This is, in part due to the growth of the CAP Program now offering support to Permanent Carers & Adoptive parents. Alongside this, is the post covid return to normal and carers are requiring support to manage the challenges of caring. Generally, across the board there is an increase in mental health issues including anxiety and depression and this is

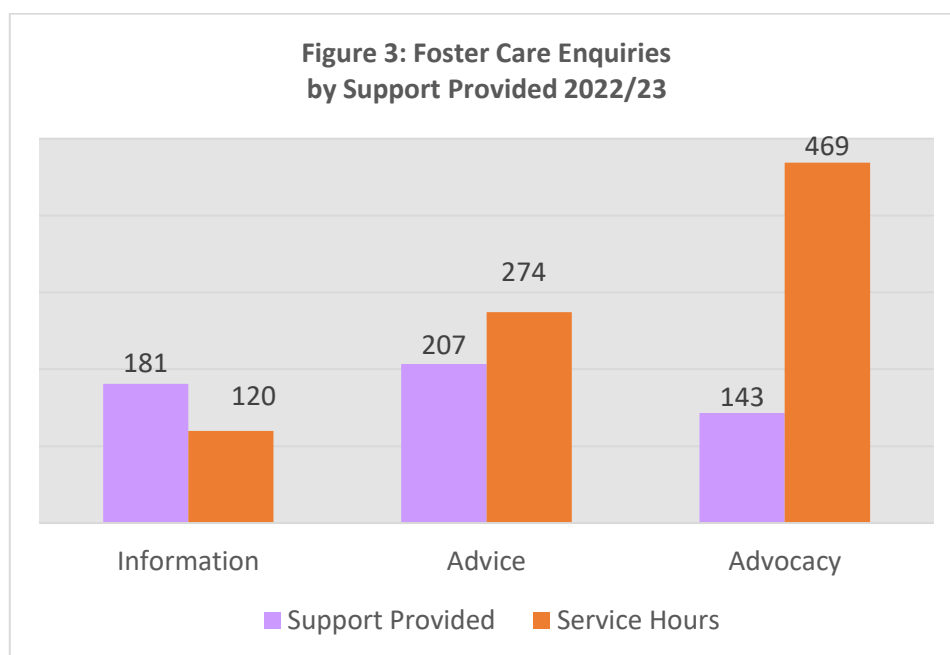
reflected in the service delivery at the FCAV. Carers are struggling with the demands of caring from the cost, through to managing children and their complexities.

The FCAV promote services through various events including retreats. The learning and development opportunities have resulted in carers seeking further individual support after attending various sessions.



### Foster Care Enquiries

From 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2023 the Carer Advocates responded to and closed **531** foster care enquiries, delivering **863** hours of service. The team provided Information to 181, Advice to 207 and Advocacy to 143 enquiries.

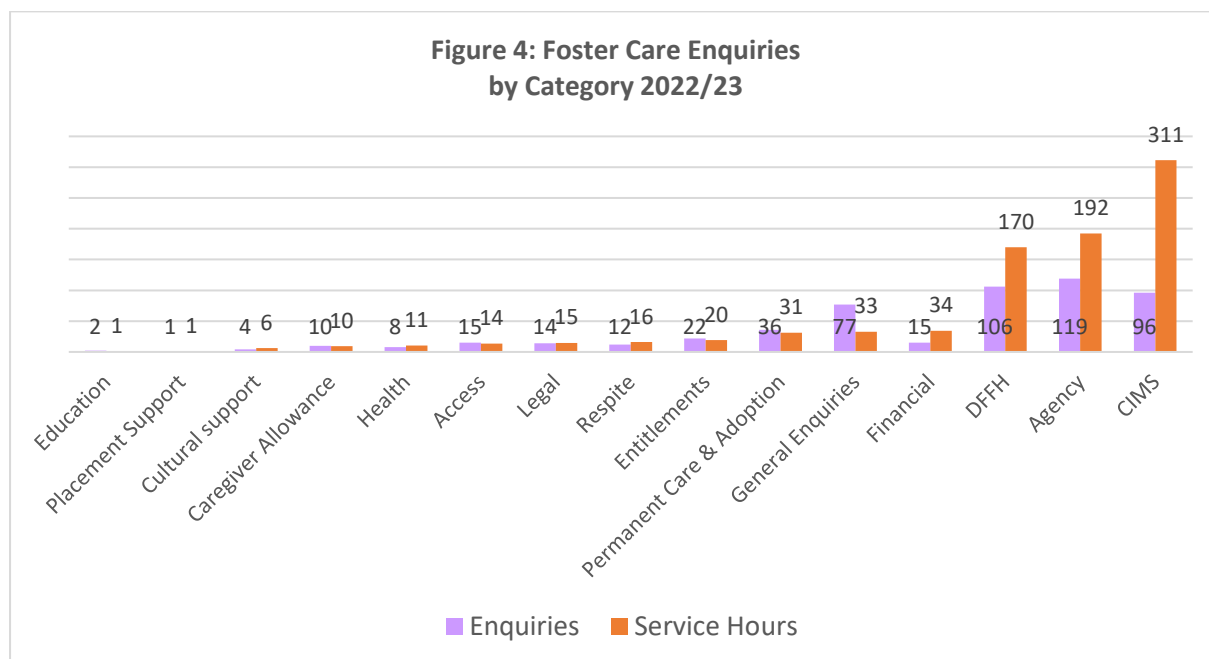


Advocacy is a significant component of the work provided to carers. Often relationships with professionals are broken and the FCAV is mediating on behalf of carers and advising them of their rights in the Out of Home Care system.

A significant component of the work is supporting carers through the CIMS process and advocating for carers rights in a difficult process. We support carers in their investigation interviews, prepare them for suitability panel and provide advice in relation to reviews and appeals of decisions.

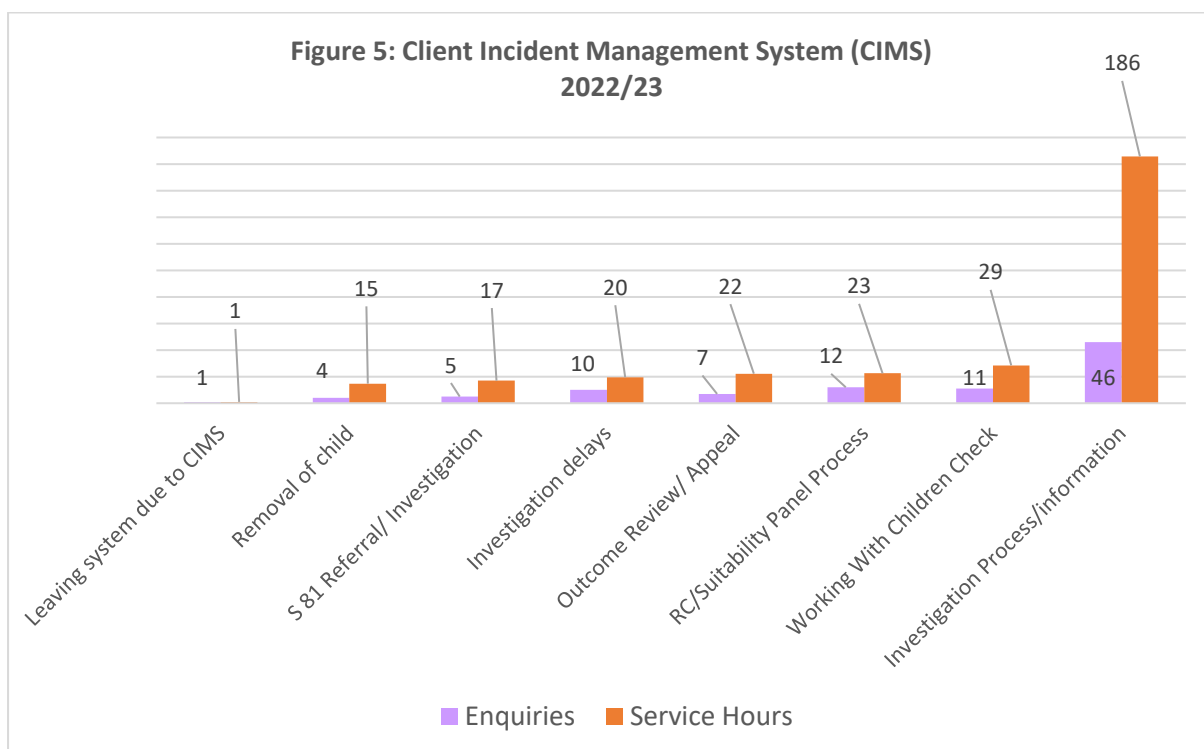
### Categories

The most time was spent responding to foster care enquiries relating to CIMS Investigations, DFFH, Agency and Financial matters (allowances and payments). Considerable time was also spent on General Enquiries; Birth Family issues, Resource requests, Becoming a carer & Permanent Care & Adoption Enquiries from foster carers converting to permanent care.



### Client Incident Management (CIMS)

There were 96 CIMS enquiries, accounting for 311 hours of service in the year. Support to carers throughout the CIMS processes clearly constitutes most of our work, suggesting that agencies are perhaps unable to provide adequate support throughout a carer’s investigation.



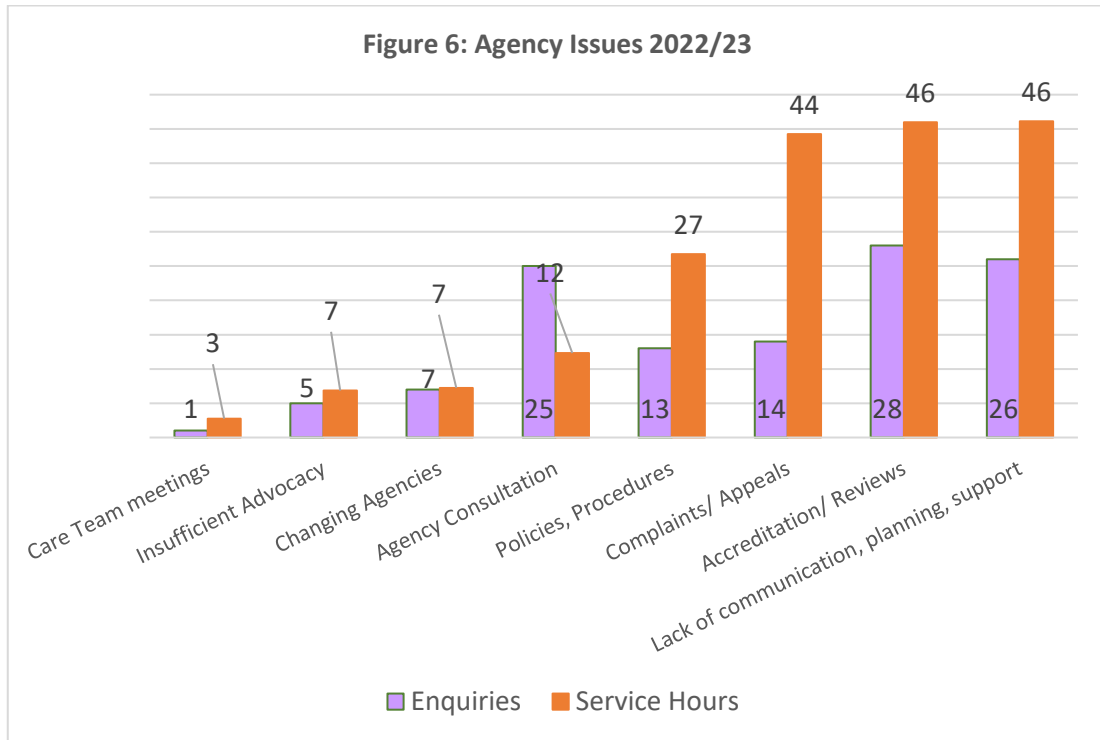
The multiple layers of CIMS (Investigation, Reportable Conduct Scheme, S81 investigations) result in confusion and repeated carer enquiries for clarity of these processes, with each enquiry averaging approximately 3 hours of support. More complex cases have required 6 to 25 hours of support.

The removal of foster child/ren following reporting of allegations has had a significant impact on retaining carers in the system. Support has been provided to carers concurrently from the Carer Advocates and the CAP Service.

The FCAV are meeting with the CIMS review team and will provide information to highlight the intense stress for carers.

### Agency Issues

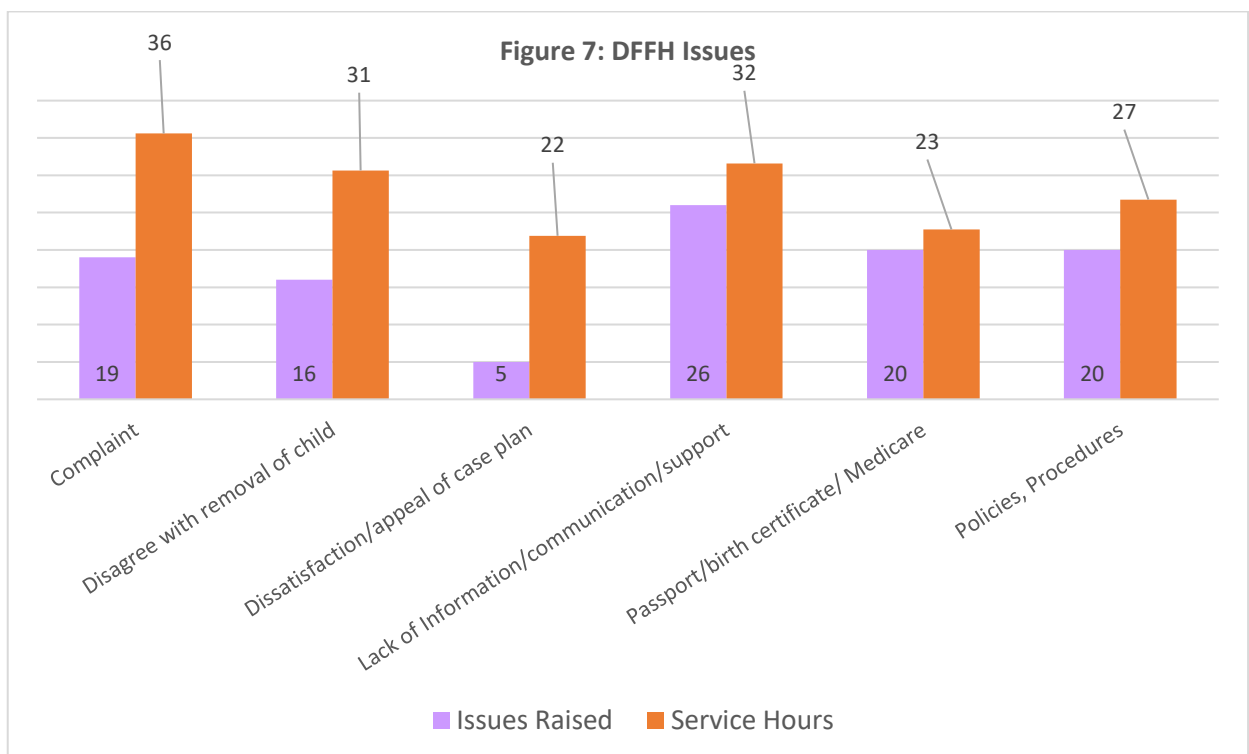
The Carer Advocates provided support to 119 enquiries relating to Agencies, accounting for 192 hours of service. Lack of communication, Accreditation/ Reviews and Complaints/ Appeals were key issues throughout the year.



The FCAV continue to support agencies, who also seek advice and council on complex matters within the system. We have commenced a road show schedule, to visit all agencies in-person across the state, developing and expanding relationships and our support to CSOs and ACCOs.

### DFFH Issues

The Carer Advocates provided support to 106 enquiries relating to DFFH, accounting for 170 hours of service. Complaints regarding Departmental policies and procedures, Passports/ Birth Certificates/ Medicare and Lack of Information/ Communication were a priority concern for carers in the year.



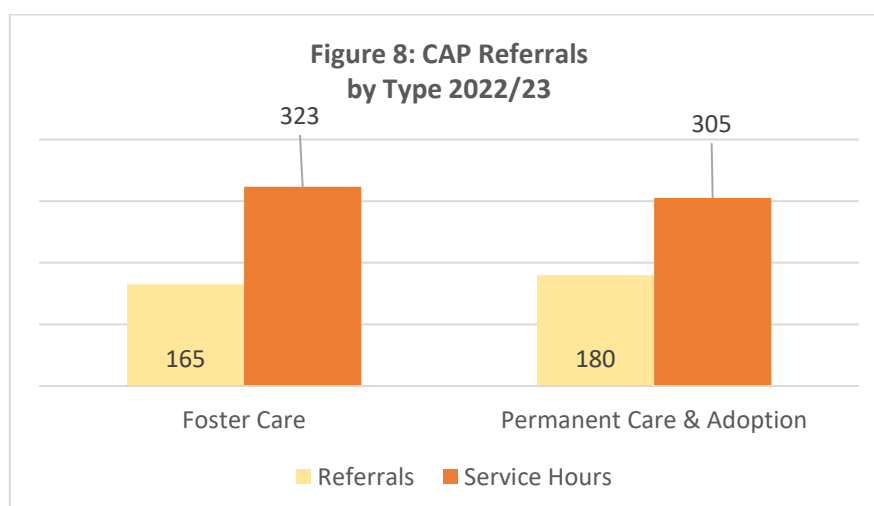
## Care Assistance Program (CAP)

In July 2022, FCAV and Permanent Care and Adoptive Families (PCA Families) partnered to expand the existing CAP service to permanent care, adoptive families and Family Law Court ordered carers.

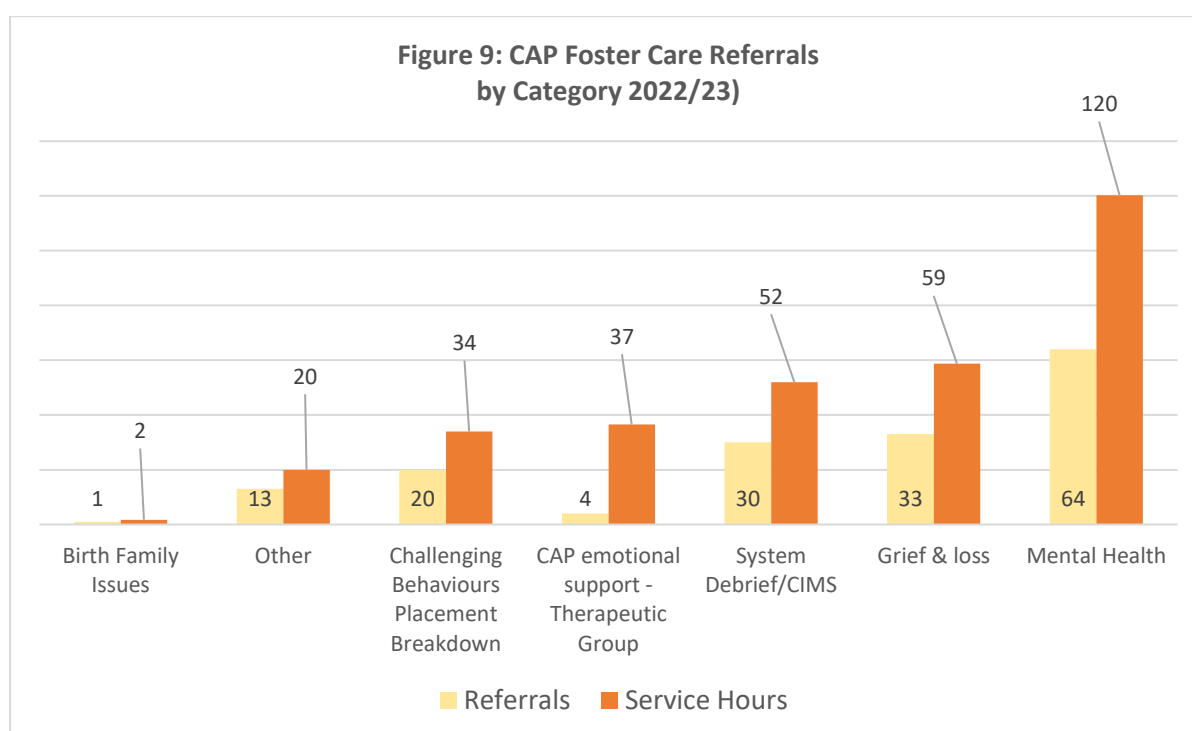
Carers and Parents who have accessed this service have found it to be beneficial. Carers feel validated and have a space to clarify their purpose and intentions. Carers share personal stories in relation to their carer journey, and often significant trauma and loss are identified for the carer.

Several couples have accessed the program, often with different expectations and experiences of the care experience. Many regional carers have accessed the service and single male carers.

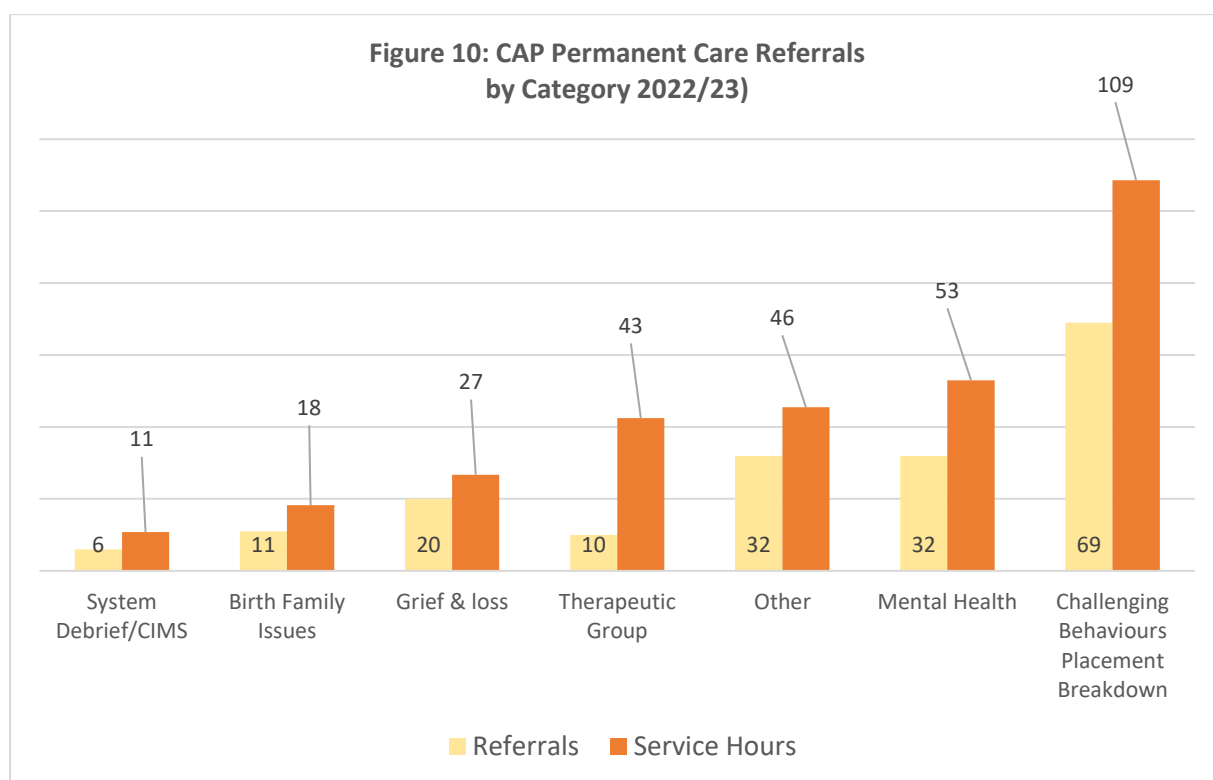
Mental health is a significant issue identified in the service. Carers express suicidal ideation. Many hours of support are offered to assist the carer to navigate and manage their intense feelings. It is concerning the care experience can create this situation for carers as well as the impact on the young children in their care. When there is an investigation and children are removed for the carer, this brings additional anxieties and tension.



### CAP Foster Care Referrals



## CAP Permanent Care Referrals



The FCAV have a further 12 months of funding and we hope to continue to develop and expand the CAP offerings to carers.

We have trialled 2 therapeutic groups, for each cohort. The groups were delivered online and were well received by participants. Participants welcomed the opportunity to meet like-minded people and share and support each other with intense grief and loss issues.

### Carer Support Team Feedback

- *“I like that the counselling combines a discussion about processing emotions as well as practical advice about working with agencies to ensure my needs are being met.”*
- *“People can’t understand the complexities of having a child with trauma issues at such a young age. It is even hard for us to understand. CAP helped to reassure us that we are doing the best we can given our situation.”*
- *“I felt valued and respected as a carer and the advocate was prompt with follow up and knowledgeable.”*
- *“I felt heard and validated but also challenged around my thoughts and feelings which was also insightful.”*
- *“Carers face many physical and emotional challenges Help is always welcome.”*
- *“(CAP) Service was brilliant, got me thinking about my needs and my approach to difficult situations, have certainly shifted in my thinking and I feel very positive.”*
- *“To feel heard and have experiences acknowledged and validated by those who know what we are dealing with and are there solely for us as carers is very comforting. (Staff) were professional, respectful and empathetic. I valued and appreciated my time with them.”*

## Learning & Development

The Learning the Development offerings have been very positive for carers, providing opportunities to socialise, share advice, practice self-care and gain knowledge.

In collaboration with PCAF we ran a retreat at RACV Torquay in September 2022 (36 permanent carers attended). We hosted a retreat at RACV Creswick in November 2022 (24 carers attended) and another at the Mercure Hotel Ballarat in March 2023 (26 carers attended).

Retreats are focused on carers developing a better understanding of self-care to help with compassion fatigue or burn out.

We have co-hosted several Cultural Days in partnership with ACCOs and local Elders across the state who provide fascinating insight into their local area and Aboriginal culture.

We hosted a Cultural Day in Geelong, September 2022 in partnership with Wathaurung, MacKillop & BCYF (60 carers attended) and in Mount Martha, January 2023 in partnership with VACCA South (23 carers and 22 children attended) and another in collaboration with VACCA in Werribee, March 2023 (18 carers and 27 children attended).

Cultural events include activities such as Welcome to Country, smoking ceremonies, education about the significance of the land and native plants, weaving, damper making, Aboriginal art, music and dance.

The FCAV partnered with Gail Walton, a private consultant to facilitate 'Hold My Hand' workshops for carers and their biological children in Dandenong, September 2022 and Caroline Springs, January 2023.

The aim of the group is to support the carer's own children to identify their place in the family, explore the impact that a child in care could have on their family, address the practicalities associated with providing care to children and young people in need. Each group consisted of 10 foster carers, and 12 children and young people as well as agency staff who wanted to learn more about the program.

We hosted 6 'Chat with the CEO' sessions for foster carers and Agency staff. These sessions have been a valuable avenue for carers to raise issues in a group setting. It is validating for carers to understand they are not alone in the process and appreciate the FCAV advocating on their behalf to improve the system. Common issues have been respite, carer allowance and NDIS.

We ran the 'Caring Thru Art' program in December 2022 consisting of 6 online sessions at night to help carers overcome compassion fatigue or burnout by taking time out to focus on their own self-care. 24 carers participated each week.



The FCAV acknowledges the unceded sovereignty of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge the continued connection to Country – including lands, cultural knowledges and their peoples – and pay our respect to Elders past and present. We are the united voice and advocate for all foster carers across Victoria, and we aim to continually develop our knowledge and act with respect to First Nations sovereignty.