

# Taskforce to increase guardianship is a family affair

By Tim Barlass

2 November 2018 – 12:05am



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A special taskforce to promote guardianship as a permanent home for vulnerable children as an alternative to foster care has been established.

That's what happened to Liam, aged two, cared for by Sharon Cheney and partner Steve McLean in Forbes. He came into their care at just two months from foster care because he couldn't stay with his biological parents.

Instead of going into long-term foster care, overseen by the Family and Community Services, he is part of the family until he grows up.



Sharon Cheney and partner Steve have guardianship of Liam, aged two, who has been in their care since he was a baby. FORBES ADVOCATE

Ms Cheney said: "It's just a way of keeping him out of the foster care system. Foster care can be the only option for some children but with guardianship it does become that permanent home, that forever family that a child needs."

"It's a better option than a child staying in long-term foster care. Liam is part of our family. Guardianship is a court process that just gives them that security. It's a commitment from the carer saying I want this little person in my life forever."

Minister for Family and Community Services Pru Goward said the guardianship taskforce was reviewing the cases of more than 7500 children in out-of-home care to see who could benefit from guardianship where adoption was not appropriate.

Adoption proceedings can be legally complex and are usually achieved through Supreme Court hearings. The NSW Government has introduced a number of reforms to streamline the adoption process.

"We know that children in out-of-home care need safety, security and permanency – they need a forever home," Ms Goward said.

"Guardianship orders can be a great way to achieve this. An order of guardianship is an important moment in a child's life because the child is no longer considered to be in out-of-home care but in the independent care of their guardian."

Guardianship is an alternative order to out-of-home care, which is made by the Children's Court when it is deemed to be in the best interest of the child. Guardianship orders can include contact with parents as part of the child's case plan. The majority of guardianship orders are with relatives.

Since changing the Care and Protection Act in 2014, more than 2800 children and young people have transitioned to guardianship orders in NSW.

Guardianship is a much more straight-forward process than adoption because it doesn't sever legal ties but has similar outcomes in that the child gets a stable home and the guardians get to make all the parenting decisions.

Meal times are busy in Liam's new family. The couple also has Boston, seven, who is adopted, and two boys aged 11 and 12 who are in foster care.



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