

Reforming the Queensland Child Protection System

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Background

Protecting our children and enhancing community safety are key priorities for the Queensland Government.

As a result of a specific matter that came to the attention of the then Minister for Families, of the long term abuse of children in a foster home north of Brisbane, she announced on 19 June 2003 that there would be an independent and external audit of current foster carers who had been subject to child protection notifications relating to children and young people placed in their care by the Department of Families.

The audit found a number of serious issues about under-resourcing, outdated information systems, practice, procedures and policy within the Department. These issues had impacted upon the care and safety of many children and young people in care. The audit also highlighted a range of systemic matters that required addressing and the Government asked the Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) to conduct an inquiry into these issues.

In January 2004 the CMC released its report, *Protecting Children: An Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Foster Care*, which marked a turning point for Queensland's child protection system.

The inquiry found that the system was failing those children and young people it was supposed to protect. Radical change was needed.

The government acted swiftly and immediately appointed a reform specialist, Peter Forster, to produce a blueprint for implementing the CMC's 110 recommendations.

Peter Forster presented the *Blueprint* to the government in March 2004 and the government stepped up the reform agenda. The changes needed were far-reaching and demanded fundamental structural, organisational and practice reforms.

A new government department focussing exclusively on the protection of children and young people – the Department of Child Safety – was at the heart of the reforms.

The government heeded the CMC's message that child protection is everyone's business, so the Department of Child Safety is forging and strengthening partnerships with other government and non-government agencies. This means a child protection system that delivers on the needs of vulnerable children, young people and their families, in a holistic and considered way.

The success of the reform process has been and continues to be highly dependent on the skills of the staff of the Department of Child Safety. The care and commitment of frontline staff was never disputed. However, the CMC report indicated that more should be done to train, support and resource staff in their challenging and often stressful work. Staff of the Department of Child Safety are now better supported, better resourced and have a suite of enhanced tools to equip them to do their important work.

Significant changes to child protection services and practice have occurred as a result of the implementation of the Blueprint reforms. New policies, practices and procedures and enhanced working relationships are creating a more responsive and accountable child protection system in Queensland.

Government is on track to fully implement the 110 CMC recommendations within the endorsed three year reform timeframe. 91 recommendations have been fully implemented, with the remaining 19 recommendations well advanced.

Structural Changes

The reform agenda has significantly strengthened Government's child protection focus and capability through:

- A dedicated ministry for child safety at the whole of Government level
- A stand alone department focussed on child protection
- Senior level directors of child safety in thirteen key departments across Queensland Government
- Child Guardian powers within the Commission for Children and Young People
- Department of Communities that addresses the prevention and early intervention needs of children and families
- Cross-agency governance mechanisms that ensure the integration of child protection services, information and policies across government
- The creation of cross-sector partnerships

There have been large-scale budget changes. The pre CMC budget for child protection was \$182 m and last year's operating budget of \$394.8 million represents a 45.3 per cent increase on the year before. Augmenting this will be a capital investment program in 2005-06 of \$58.8 million.

Legislation

The *Child Protection Act 1999* has been strengthened to underpin Government's child safety reform agenda. These legislative changes place the interests of a child at the forefront of child protection practice and have:

- established the Child Guardian and Child Death Review functions
- expanded the role of the Community Visitor and the Children Services Tribunal
- strengthened mandatory reporting, including reporting of risks to unborn children
- improved regulation of carers
- strengthened the Indigenous Child Placement Principle and the role of Indigenous Recognised Entities, and
- improved the quality of child protection practice in Queensland through the legislation of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) teams, case planning for children in care and enhanced information sharing to improve outcomes for children in care.

Quality of Practice

The quality of child protection practice in Queensland has been enhanced through a range of initiatives designed to promote quality, evidence based practice within Queensland's child protection system.

A network of 46 Child Safety Service Centres (CSSCs) and seven Zones have been established to provide dedicated, responsive child safety services to communities throughout Queensland. Managers, Senior Practitioners and Team Leaders have been newly recruited to each of these centres to provide leadership in child protection practice and corporate governance

An additional 470 Child Safety Officers have been recruited, improving the capacity of the child protection system to respond to notifications and to provide more intensive support to 'at risk' families and children in the care of the state.

A ten week Child Safety Officer induction program is now delivered by a specialist training unit within the Department of Child Safety to ensure professional staff recruited to Child Safety Service Centres have the essential skills and practice knowledge to deliver high quality child safety services.

For the first time in Queensland, departmental officers have a Child Safety Practice Manual that sets out their statutory obligations and provides the basis for high standard and consistent practice across the State. The manual is based on best practice and operationalises the child protection legislation and policies and inter-agency agreements and protocols for all stages of the child safety continuum.

Queensland has implemented Structured Decision Making (SDM). SDM is an internationally recognised, evidenced based model for making critical decisions in child protection. Initially developed by the Children's Research Centre in the United States and customised for Queensland circumstances, the system will equip Child Safety Officers with standardised, evidence-based tools to facilitate consistent and effective decisions at critical points in the lives of children and families with whom the department is working.

Intensive training has been provided to Senior Practitioners and other key staff to ensure they have the necessary skills and expertise to lead effective implementation of SDM within their respective Child Safety Service Centres.

An enhanced two tier Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) system has been fully implemented. The system comprises twenty multi-disciplinary interagency SCAN teams across the State that:

- assess information;
- ensure coordinated and culturally appropriate responses to the protective needs of children are in place; and
- formulate and implement recommendations for action.

Because vulnerable children and young people deserve nothing but the best, they are now supported by more staff, who are better skilled and equipped with world class practice tools.

Quality Placements

Quality out-of-home placements have been expanded to improve the safety and stability for children and young people who are unable to remain safely with their family.

Strengthened screening, training and support for foster carers will improve the quality and number of foster care placements available in Queensland. A thorough initial screening process based on the latest research allows for early identification of inappropriate applicants.

Respite options have been identified for foster carers, and significant enhancements to foster carer remuneration will better support foster carers in meeting the direct costs of children in their care.

A major foster carer recruitment campaign is well underway, with the aim of attracting an extra 500 carers from a diverse range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, including additional Indigenous foster carers.

In 2004-05, an additional 140 new and enhanced out of home residential care places were funded to meet the needs of children and young people with high, complex and extreme needs. Funding for a further 222 new out of home care places has been advertised in 2005-06, and submissions from non-government service providers have been analysed to ensure a diverse range of high quality care places can be provided.

As a result of the improvements made to out of home care children now have access to a greater range of placement options to better suit their individual needs.

Partnerships

In recognition of the importance of strategic child protection partnerships to quality service provision, a number of whole of government partnerships have been formed to oversee the reform process. They are:

- The Child Safety Coordinating and Implementation Committees. These committees consist of the Directors-General of all Queensland Government Departments with an interest in child protection
- The Child Safety Directors Network (CSDN). This network supports the Government's child focussed and responsive child protection system and plays a key role in the promotion of child safety. A position was established within each agency that has an interest in child protection
- The Statewide Partnership Taskforce, comprising representatives from government and the non-government sector
- SCAN Teams, and
- The Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Partnership (the Partnership), to progress culturally appropriate service provision.

Quality Assurance / Standards and Licensing

The Department of Child Safety, in collaboration with the Statewide Partnership Taskforce, has developed a quality assurance strategy that will clearly define acceptable standards for child protection services. The strategy will also set out the processes by which compliance with the standards will be assessed and monitored. The quality assurance system will apply

to both licensed care services provided by the non-government sector, as well as services provided by the Department of Child Safety from July 2006.

Indigenous Children

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people continue to be significantly over represented in the Queensland child protection system. The government is committed to working collaboratively and respectfully with Indigenous communities to address this issue and to ensure that child protection services are culturally accessible, relevant and appropriate.

From 1 November 2005, 28 Indigenous Recognised Entities were established across the State supporting the department to achieve better outcomes for Indigenous children.

Indigenous service delivery issues including the provision of child protection statutory services, the cultural competence of government officers and community capacity development remain a concern for the progress in reducing the Indigenous over-representation in the child protection system.

The establishment of the Indigenous Support and Development Branch within the Department of Child Safety, together with Recognised Entities that have been established will increase the capacity of the department to progress Indigenous service delivery over the third year of the reform agenda.

14 Indigenous Child Safety Officer cadetships are in place for Indigenous people studying social work and human service courses.

Access to the Certificate IV in Community Services (Statutory Child Protection) is now being provided to all Child Safety Support Officers. This program will be delivered in partnership with TAFE Queensland. Fifty places in the program are being provided for staff from Indigenous Recognised Entities.

The partnership has provided input into departmental legislative, policy and practice developments and provided ongoing support to organisations delivering the Indigenous Recognised Entity functions.

Quality Support Services

Many children who come into the care of the state have complex needs, requiring significant therapeutic intervention. A range of therapeutic and other interventions are being progressively implemented to optimise the social, educational, physical and emotional well being of these children and young people. These include:

- the development of an Education Support Plan (ESP) for every child enrolled in school and who is subject to a child protection order. 99% of all children in out of home care in the state school system now have an ESP and 71% of children in out of home care attending Catholic Schools have an ESP. Queensland Children in care are the first in Australia to received special assistance through ESP's;
- the provision of specialist disability assessments and behaviour support services through the Queensland Government department responsible for disability, Disability Services Queensland;
- enhanced funding to augment the sexual abuse counselling services funded by the departments of Child Safety and Communities

- the commencement of a three year Multi-Systemic Therapy research project and the establishment of nine Mental Health-Child Safety Therapeutic Support Teams across the state to provide therapeutic treatment programs for children in care with extreme psychological and behavioural problems; and
- the commencement of a project to develop a baseline health assessment tool and health plan for children in out of home care.

Seventeen new non-government services have been funded to provide family re-unification services that support the return of children and young people to their family where their safety and well-being can be assured.

Referral for Active Intervention

The Queensland Department of Communities is rolling out the final instalment of \$8.5M, for prevention and early intervention. Supported by a process of needs based planning, \$7.6M is available in 2005-06 to fund the development of a lead Referral for Active Intervention services in ten locations across Queensland.

Referral for Active Intervention (RAI) was developed to ensure access to appropriate services for those families who have been subject to multiple notifications and to prevent them from being subject to future notifications. Of those children notified and investigated, only a small percentage are determined to be in need of protection and therefore require ongoing DChS intervention. For example, in 2003-04, 15.5% of children notified became subject to an Intensive Family Support case or child protection order. The remaining 84.5% received no ongoing support from the DChS

A RAI process will be implemented from 1 April 2006, in ten lead sites to support families with children aged 0 – 8 years who have been subject to multiple priority two and three child protection notifications. The Department of Child Safety will be responsible for managing referrals to lead service providers to ensure that agreed timeframes can be met and the capacity of the organisations to respond is not overloaded

Integrated Services across the Child Safety Continuum

The Queensland Government now recognises the importance of the child safety continuum, to ensure vulnerable children, young people and their families have access to services they need. These services range from universal prevention, targeted early intervention, including early intervention services targeted at children at risk of entering the tertiary child protection system, intensive family support and child protection intervention.

Quality service responses for 'at risk families' require integration and coordination across a range of Government departments and community organisations. Through the Child Safety Implementation and Coordinating Committees, and the Child Safety Directors Network, better quality and integrated services are now available across Government.

The Department of Communities is leading the development the *Early Years Strategy* to build a comprehensive service system that will provide access to early intervention and support services to reduce the number of families falling into crisis and requiring statutory intervention.

The Department of Communities has also led the development of the safe haven model to provide a place of safety for children affected by family violence, to integrate existing service responses and to provide a range of outreach family support and community capacity building activities.

The Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy (DATSIP) has assisted agencies to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through mechanisms such as the negotiation table process and child safety networks. DATSIP is also working with agencies to deliver a service delivery framework, ensuring service delivery plans to Indigenous communities incorporate child protection as an area of focus. In December 2005 the Queensland Cabinet endorsed the further development of an integrated Indigenous child safety service delivery model, incorporating community development, engagement and best practice partnership approaches between community, government and non-government sectors.

The Department of Housing has given priority to foster carers in need of housing and to families where children are at risk of harm due to poor housing.

Queensland Police Service (QPS) has enhanced the capacity of the Juvenile Aid Bureau to provide specialist policing response to children as victims of crime. QPS has also strengthened its policy, procedures and training to support the rejuvenated SCAN system and has enhanced its capability to investigate organised and serial paedophilia and internet child pornography.

Queensland Health is piloting health assessment plans for children in out-of-home care in metropolitan Brisbane to ensure the child accesses appropriate and timely health care to meet their individual needs. Queensland Health has also conducted training and education of nurses in regard to mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse, including risks to an unborn child.

Child Safety Operating Environment

The CMC and previous inquiries identified that poor information systems contributed to the breakdown of service delivery.

Upgrades to desktop computer software, email systems, infrastructure and networks are improving systems speed and performance. This has made an enormous change to the way departmental officers attend to their core business, particularly in the more rural and remote areas. Previously staff were using outmoded office systems such as Microsoft 98 which was so cumbersome officers often simply did not use them. This established a verbal culture where staff would not use the email system; would not use the departmental Infonet to access policies and procedures or use databases to store information. One of the CMC's key concerns was the lack of complete records. There was a need to establish practices to improve the quality, consistency and standard of departmental record keeping and support improved service delivery and accountability.

Stage 1 of a Carer Directory has been launched, enabling Child Safety Service Centre staff to match placements for children more quickly and effectively by providing accurate information on approved carers, the care environment and the availability of either carers or places in licensed care facilities.

Full functionality of the Carer Directory is scheduled to be deployed this month and the Integrated Client Management System (ICMS) will be progressively rolled out over 2006. ICMS is a key enabler for Child Safety Officers to better manage their workloads and to have immediate access to current and historical information in order to make informed decisions for children and young people in the child protection system.

Accommodation

To provide appropriate office space to cater for the growth in child safety service capacity and to improve the safety and security for Department of Child Safety staff new or upgraded facilities have been rolled out across the state. Design features of the new facilities include:

- informal, formal and secure interview rooms;
- a child's play area;
- a foster carer's room;
- secure car parking;
- duress alarms and an ability to "lock down" reception;
- improved conference facilities;
- "break out" areas for staff and clients; and
- separate toilets for staff and clients.

Internal Accountability

Strong accountability mechanisms have been established within the Department of Child Safety and include:

- implementation of a critical incident reporting management system to increase the accountability for the management of effective, quality responses to all critical incidents;
- an internal Child Death Review Committee that promotes systemic improvement through utilising practice information gained through reviewing the deaths of children known to the department;
- a Complaints, Case Review and Investigations Branch that supports organisational accountability and learning through the receipt and processing of complaints about departmental service provision and quality assurance processes;
- investigations of significant incidents and auditing of notifications involving foster carers;
- implementation of Operational Performance Reviews at the Child Safety Service Centre and zonal levels and monitoring of monthly performance data to analyse performance trends in each zone and identify improvement strategies; and
- the prevention, management, reporting and investigation of "misconduct" and "official misconduct" through the activities of the Ethical Standards Unit.

External Accountability

To promote an open, transparent and accountable child protection system, a number of strong external accountability mechanisms are now in place.

- New 'child guardian' functions within the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYPCG) has been established to monitor and investigate complaints about services provided by the Department of Child Safety or other service providers; to conduct proactive audits, reviews and other monitoring activities; and to coordinate an extended community visitor program which has been extended to include all children in care.
- An annual Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian's report

- A multi-disciplinary independent Child Death Case Review Committee (CDCRC) with expertise in paediatrics, child health, mental health, investigations and child protection is in place to analyse the deaths of children known to the Department of Child Safety in order to assess the quality of child protection practice and identify opportunities for systemic improvement. The CDCRC is chaired by the Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian.
- Government is required to report on progress of reforms to CMC.

Positive outcomes for Children in care

As children in care were the focus of the CMC's inquiry it is important to examine how such reforms have improved in the lives of these children.

- Children now participate in the decisions that affect them, for example in developing their case plans and in family group meetings.
- Children have the opportunity to voice any concerns and have them addressed through regular visits from Child Safety Officers and Community Visitors.
- Queensland's children are the first children in care in Australia to receive special assistance through Education Support Plans.
- Children have significantly greater access to a range of therapeutic care and counselling, including sexual abuse counselling, is now available to redress past harm.
- There has been an increased access for children to a range of placement options to better suit their individual needs.
- Foster carers are now better screened, trained and supported to better care for children in their care.
- Children and their foster families have priority access to social housing.
- Young people are better supported through improved planning and information as they make the transition from the child protection system to independent living.
- Children in care are now supported by more staff, who are better skilled and equipped with world class practice tools.
- Where children's safety and well being can be assured, children are supported through improved family reunification services.

Where to from here?

Following the release of the report on 6 January 2006 the CMC are, over at least a six month period, reviewing the report, available data, additional information such as program evaluation reports and recommendations, and conducting targeted interviews to determine the progress in reforming the child protection system in Queensland. It is anticipated that the CMC will produce a further report to Government in the second half of this year.

Considerable documentation has and will continue to be provided to the CMC in addition to that contained within the public report. This will include new data, as it becomes available, evaluation reports and details of further policy and program development.

The Department of Child Safety will continue to work with the CMC throughout 2006 to progress the remaining recommendations to conclusion and to inform and address issues as they come to light.

To date 91 of the 110 CMC recommendations have been completed.

The Blueprint provided the strategies to establish and resource the new child safety model. The reforms provide for additional staff and reduced workloads, better training and improved accountability. The new model includes innovative whole of government approaches and community partnerships for assisting children and young people at risk. We all recognise there is still work to be done. However we also recognise the major achievements of the Department of Child Safety over the past two years. It is gratifying to take some time to reflect on how far we have come by focussing on an open, transparent and accountable manner on what is in the best interests of Queensland's vulnerable children.