



Speech by

Hon. ANNA BLIGH

MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

Hansard 3 March 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Petford Training Farm

Hon. A. M. BLIGH (South Brisbane—ALP) (Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care and Minister for Disability Services) (10.07 a.m.), by leave: I am pleased today to table a copy of an independent evaluation of and a financial report on the Petford Training Farm in far-north Queensland. I am also pleased to advise honourable members of my response to the recommendations made by the independent evaluator, Mr Peter Daffen. In making my decision, I have relied on the report of the independent evaluation, on numerous departmental investigations over a 14-year period and a recent report by the Queensland Police Service.

My deliberations have focused on three issues—the safety of children, the effectiveness of the programs offered and the accountability of public funds. In considering the safety of children, I had regard to the alarming history of the Petford Training Farm. The consultant's evaluation has identified at least 35 incidents reported to the department and the police between 1986 and 1998. Incidents reported to the department and to the police by residents, former staff and parents include physical assaults, sexual assaults upon residents by other residents and staff, petrol sniffing, access to firearms, access to morphine and syringes, rope burns around a child's neck, refusing children food as punishment, inappropriate sexual touching, a failure to seek medical treatment, which in one case resulted in a child suffering liver damage, and the possible exploitation of children as cheap labour for commercial operations.

A number of cases of abuse have been substantiated and entered on the child protection register. I am further concerned that the manager, Mr Geoff Guest, has confirmed that he regularly uses a psychological technique called bio-neuro feedback. I regard the use of this technique on young boys by staff with no qualifications, without the consent of the department or these boys' parents, as a very serious matter and have referred it to the Health Minister for further consideration.

The police have investigated many of these allegations over the years. As is often the case when dealing with child abuse, the police have had difficulty gaining sufficient evidence to lay charges. In many cases, however, police have been able to substantiate that abuse and harm has indeed occurred. However, even where police have received statements or incidents have been substantiated by staff and other residents, the alleged victims or witnesses are reluctant to go to court or lay charges. Despite this, the frequency, consistency and pattern of these allegations over more than a decade are of such concern that I cannot have any confidence about the safety of children who stay at this place.

My second consideration was the effectiveness of the programs offered to young people at this facility. Much has been said about this. However, there is little evidence of young offenders being successfully rehabilitated at Petford. In fact, police records reveal that between 1994 and 1998 a total of 91 offences were recorded against 39 individual young people who were either resident at Petford at the time of committing the offence or were residing at Petford when they were located by the police. These 91 offences include motor vehicle theft, possession and/or use of drugs, assault occasioning bodily harm and indecent assault on a child. These charges do not reflect effective rehabilitation. These charges reflect a situation that is simply out of control.

Finally, I am obliged to consider matters of financial management and accountability. A report conducted by a financial controller appointed in December of last year concluded that the situation at Petford was so serious that an auditor would not be able to offer an opinion about Petford's financial

position due to the lack of any records. In the face of the appalling record of this facility, I believe I have no alternative but to cease funding and have today advised the board of this decision.

I want to assure the people of far-north Queensland today that the funds previously allocated to Petford will remain in that region for safe, appropriate and effective services for young people. Consultations have already begun with the key stakeholders in the region to determine an appropriate model of service.

I have been made aware of the level of support that Mr Geoff Guest, the founder of Petford, enjoys. However, as the Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care, my responsibility lies unequivocally with the children of this State. I will not abrogate that duty of care and place one more child at risk. After 12 years of failing to ensure the safety of children, 12 years of failing to account for public funds and 12 years of failing to achieve rehabilitative outcomes, the days of the Petford Training Farm as a State-funded institution are officially over.
