



Speech by

Hon. Mike Reynolds

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

Hansard Thursday, 17 June 2004

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Crime and Misconduct Commission, Operation Ghost

Hon. M.F. REYNOLDS (Townsville—ALP) (Minister for Child Safety) (4.56 p.m.), by leave: On 2 October 2003 the former department of families referred information obtained from the audit into foster-carers to the Crime and Misconduct Commission. Following the receipt of this information, the commission launched an investigation named Operation Ghost. Today the department has received a completed report from the CMC titled 'The Investigation Report into Operation Ghost'.

This report contains a number of recommendations, some of which recommend that the department consider disciplinary action against four staff members pursuant to section 87 of the Public Service Act 1996. Our task now is to thoroughly consider these recommendations and to advise the CMC of the outcomes. Let me make it absolutely clear that my department took immediate action in October last year to ensure that the children were safe. In addition, two senior positions have been put in place in the region to ensure comprehensive case planning and a child focused approach, and that the interests of the children are paramount in all of our decision making.

On top of this, since January 2004 two teams of experienced officers have worked for eight weeks each consecutively in the area office to mentor and assist staff in their case work and case management. I met this afternoon with the Director-General of the Department of Communities and senior officers and have put in place a plan that includes strategies as to how the department will deal with the disciplinary matters referred to in the report.

I have asked for urgent advice on whether four staff members against whom disciplinary action has been recommended for consideration by the department should be stood down until such time as a thorough assessment of the matters raised is undertaken or whether the staff members should be allocated alternate duties in the Department of Communities. I have instructed the Director-General of the Department of Communities to provide advice as to the expected date of the conclusion of this assessment.

Keeping in mind that a process of natural justice must be followed, I want this to occur in a considered and timely way. The report to the department is a very factual one and it contains the names of children who are, or were, subject to child protection orders, foster-carers, other family members and a range of different staff. Public release of the report would constitute a breach of the confidentiality provisions contained in the Child Protection Act.

I give the House my absolute and resolute assurance that I will act on this report in a very timely and decisive way. I am determined that the Department of Child Safety will always act in the child's best interests on every occasion. Both the department and I value the work that staff undertake on a daily basis to keep children safe. The new Department of Child Safety is committed to quality care for children at risk of, or who have experienced, abuse or neglect. In this new culture let me make it quite clear that there is no place for carelessness, incompetence or inefficiency.

As members are well aware, a blueprint for the implementation of the CMC's 110 recommendations was developed by consultant Peter Forster, and a staged process is currently taking place to transition the former Department of Families staff to the new Department of Child Safety. This process is designed to both improve the operational practices of the new department and ensure that the culture of the former Department of Families is not transferred to the Department of Child Safety.

Can I put on record the cooperation and collaboration that I have had with Minister Warren Pitt and his Director-General, Linda Apelt, in the work that we are jointly doing. As members would be aware today, the staff who are working for the old Families Department work for the Department of Communities. That is why we have involved the Director-General of the Department of Communities in liaison with her minister on this matter today.

The CMC's Operation Ghost report made several recommendations, four of which related to the following areas—

- enhanced training and professional development processes for field staff—this is being done;
- the DCS continue and complete the upgrade of information systems—this is being done;
- initial screening mechanisms for foster-carers be more efficient and identify characteristics associated with continuing in foster care and provide good outcomes for children—this is being done.

The fourth recommendation that the CMC have commented on is thorough standardised case planning that is consistently applied and focused on the best interests of the child. This is being done.

More than 100 staff have now completed training as part of the department's new compulsory eight-week training program and are now delivering professional child protection services throughout the state. Five more training programs are scheduled for the rest of the year, with a capacity for 100 participants, and will be targeted at the new employees we are currently recruiting and temporary employees recently appointed to tenure. The state government is committed to recruiting and retraining highly skilled child safety officers. In October last year it announced funding of \$3 million over the next three years for mandatory training and professional development for all of our child protection workers. That is being done. A massive multimillion-dollar information systems overhaul is set to become the backbone of Queensland's most extensive child protection reforms following a capital funding injection of \$44.4 million over the next three years.

Over the next year alone the Beattie Government will spend \$22 million to create a state-of-the-art technological and information framework that will enable the government's new Child Protection Agency to better protect children suffering or at risk of abuse. The major component of the department's information renewal initiative is the integrated client management system, which will provide improved and more accessible information on children at risk of abuse or in care, foster-carers and licensed care providers.

Intensive work is under way to address the following: pre-service foster care training; mandatory 12 hour pre-service training for general approved carers; completion of two further advanced training workshops per year as has been agreed; relative carers will be required to participate in induction training tailored to their needs; and, finally, a central foster care register will be set up to record the details of all foster-carers in Queensland and will be accessible by carers at all times.

As part of its foster-carer training initiative, the department is developing an online manual and video manual to accommodate for remote access. As I have indicated, it is also developing an induction program for relative carers. The department is in the process of implementing standardised case planning that is being consistently applied. The focus of work within the Department of Child Safety is that the best interests of the child are absolutely paramount. All staff within the current Department of Communities are attending transition workshops, which include two full days in relation to consistent case planning principles, thorough safety and risk assessment and case management principles as well. A practice manual is well advanced which will provide clear guidance in relation to departmental standards and practice.

I say to the House today that I am committed to the delivery of child-focused child safety services in Queensland and I will not be deterred from this commitment. As indicated by the CMC today, the concerns raised in Operation Ghost are similar to issues highlighted by Operation Zellow and have already been addressed by the 110 recommendations in the CMC's Protecting Children report. Those recommendations are being thoroughly and comprehensively acquitted by my department, and the work is being carried out absolutely in accordance with the blueprint, as is evidenced by the passage of the stage 1 child protection legislative amendments here in the House yesterday afternoon.

I conclude by saying that I will not resign from my duty as Minister for Child Safety, and I will continue to put the most vulnerable children of Queensland absolutely first.