



Speech by

Hon. Mike Reynolds

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

Hansard Tuesday, 31 August 2004

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Child Protection

Hon. M.F. REYNOLDS (Townsville—ALP) (Minister for Child Safety) (10.18 a.m.): I am pleased to report that the reform work of the Department of Child Safety over the last quarter has delivered significant progress in the child safety performance measures. These performance measures are in the early stages of development and as Minister for Child Safety I am determined to lead Australia in this work as part of the Beattie government's commitment to be open, transparent and accountable. Progress in implementing the Peter Forster blueprint has been substantial. Already 16 of the 110 recommendations have been fully met, although the majority of the recommendations are not scheduled for finalisation until late 2004 or during 2005 and 2006.

The organisational structures for the Department of Child Safety and the Department of Communities have been announced and 248 change management and staff transition workshops completed, attended by more than 2,300 staff. Child safety directors have now been appointed to the 10 government agencies aligned with child protection. A nationwide recruitment campaign for 518 additional staff over three years—with 318 scheduled for 2003-04—resulted in 1,600 applications. Stage 1 of legislative reforms has been completed, and stage 2 reforms will be introduced to parliament in late September. A new \$13.2 million funding round for 134 additional alternative care places has been completed and attracted 108 submissions, with contracts to be awarded shortly.

Some key measures reflect workloads in the system and indicate the effectiveness of the interventions with children, their families and of course their carers. The statistics indicate that departmental interventions are working in a number of significant areas. The data compares 2002-03 with estimated actual results for 2003-04. It is provisional material and will be fully reported to cabinet in November 2004 in the 2003-04 *Child protection system baseline* report. For example, over the last two financial years the number of notifications increased by 3,555 from 31,068 in 2002-03 to 34,623 in 2003-04. Principally, this increase was due to the significant attention and scrutiny of the child protection system from government, media and the community, and so should it have been, and we see positively now a greater increase in the number of notifications. More than 170 temporary positions were created to specifically address the backlog of child protection notifications. I know that the member for Logan will be very pleased to hear this, as I have discussed it with him on many occasions—that is, I am pleased to note that the backlog of over 1,000 notifications awaiting initial assessment in the Logan area office in April is now running at less than 100.

The performance data also indicate that the number of deaths of children known to the child protection system rose from 19 in 2002-03 to 36 in 2003-04. However, as I said at the estimates committee, we need to take care when noting this increase. The quality of child deaths data has been historically poor and improvements to data collection have occurred over the past months and will continue to advance due to information exchange protocols with Births, Deaths and Marriages and stage 1 legislation amendments. Given these historical issues, the validity and comparability of the stated 19 child deaths in 2002-03 is highly questionable. A better approach is to compare the percentage of total child

deaths in Queensland with the number of at-risk children who died. In the latest 2001 census year data, 562 children—or approximately 0.06 per cent of the population aged 17 years or under—died in Queensland. In 2003-04, 0.1 per cent of children known to the department died from a range of causes. Given the complexity of the issues faced by families of at-risk children, it is sad but not surprising that a slightly higher percentage of children at risk died. Seven of the 36 deaths in 2003-04 were of children or youngsters in the department's care at the time of their death. Six of those seven died of natural causes and the cause of the remaining death is yet to be determined.

Under new legislation, every child death known to my department will be thoroughly investigated. Our system will be responsive to review findings to ensure that our practices and case work are of the very highest standard. While most jurisdictions focus on deaths from abuse and neglect only, rigorous departmental reviews will be undertaken on all children known to the department within three years prior to their death, regardless of cause of death. We will continue to lead the way in this regard. My commitment to transparency and accountability is affirmed by the very easy accessibility of child deaths data on the department's information gateway and our use of independent external reviewers.

It is important that in Queensland we do not lose sight of the need for all parents to show diligent care in looking after their children. This is a matter, as all members of this House would be aware, of life or death for our young people or our babies. It is also important that the media and the community do not pre-judge the circumstances surrounding a child's death. The death of any child is distressing—to the family, to my departmental staff and of course to the broader community. To automatically assume that the death of a child known to the department relates to abuse and neglect is unjust and unhelpful, both to the family and also to my departmental staff. In all fairness, we need to await the outcomes of the child death reviews before final judgments are made.

My department is currently reviewing data from a range of sources in relation to allegations of abuse by foster carers. In reviewing this data, the department has identified the need to consult with relevant organisations to improve current policies and practices relating to such notifications and their investigation. As the inaugural Minister for Child Safety, I am pleased to be able to present this information to the House today and reaffirm the Beattie government's commitment not only to accountability but also to providing the best possible support and care to the most vulnerable children and young people in the state of Queensland.