




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 16 May 2019

**WORKING WITH CHILDREN (RISK MANAGEMENT AND SCREENING) AND
OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (12.10 pm): I start by acknowledging and thanking Cheryl Vardon, the Principal Commissioner of the Queensland Family and Child Commission, for her work in child safety. For many years now, Queensland has led the way in providing safe environments for children through the blue card system, Queensland's term for working with children checks. The system works alongside other laws and processes to help keep children safe. It has wide reach in the Queensland community. Almost one in every five adults is subject to daily monitoring because they have a blue card or have applied for one. Organisations across a variety of sectors are required to identify and manage the risk of harm to children.

The system does not currently have the capacity to keep up with the needs and expectations of the people who use it or rely on it. It provides robust processes for screening those people who wish to work with children, but we know that the processes need streamlining and that it is overdue for investment if it is to remain one of the best in Australia. These reforms will be even more critical now that the Commonwealth Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has commenced.

The working with children check is only one of many ways organisations can create environments where children are safe. These checks will only prevent people with particular categories of known offences or issues from working or volunteering with children. Even the best screening systems cannot accurately predict which people will offend against children in the future. Queensland needs to restructure its laws, policies and resourcing to change the way we think about children's safety, as we rely too much on working with children checks. The best way to keep children safe is to focus on education and ensure Queensland has child-safe organisations in conjunction with the best blue card system. This is where we need to direct our attention.

Throughout the review process, stakeholders highlighted the need to reform the blue card system to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, both to improve participation in employment and to make kinship care accessible. Achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples requires change at every level of the process. We need to provide opportunities to actively involve Indigenous people in decision-making and we need to improve the system's capacity to understand different cultural approaches. However, in doing so we must also remain vigilant in keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children safe in their communities.

In acknowledging the need for us to do more, we propose some amendments that expand the range of disqualifying offences, remove the eligibility declaration and of course compel applicants to disclose their international criminal history. Queensland's blue card system has two key components. It imposes obligations on organisations to adopt child-safe organisation approaches through risk management strategies to keep children safe and to ensure that volunteers' working with children checks are done. Information on blue card holders and applicants is monitored on a daily basis to identify changes in criminal activity.

As a regulatory scheme, the blue card system has a unique reach in the community. The continued eligibility of over 700,000 blue card holders and applicants is monitored on a daily basis. This equates to approximately one in every five Queensland adults. The blue card system is part of a much broader framework for keeping children safe in our community and complements the criminal justice system and the other laws and strategies that work to protect children. These include laws for managing offenders who have committed child related offences as well as systems for child protection and regulation of early childhood education and care. These are designed to help support parents, carers and families who have primary responsibility for keeping children safe.

To ensure that other members in the House have an opportunity to speak, I say in closing that there are some concerns with the bill. I am sure that consideration of the amendments will give us an opportunity to discuss those further. I congratulate everyone who put forward amendments to make this legislation stronger as well as everyone involved. Keeping our children in Queensland safe must be our priority. That is why in supporting the bill we look forward to ensuring that children in Queensland are safe.