




Speech By  
**Rob Molhoek**

**MEMBER FOR SOUTHPORT**

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### **CHILD PROTECTION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr MOLHOEK** (Southport—LNP) (3.20 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Child Protection and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2020. I would like to reflect on 2012-13 when I was called upon to be the assistant minister for child safety. During that 12 months I had the privilege of visiting child safety service centres across the length and breadth of Queensland. In fact, I visited 32 of the then 43 centres across the state. I spent days on the road with child safety officers visiting some of our most vulnerable communities, including some Indigenous communities on the cape, communities west of Rockhampton and near Kingaroy, as well as many child safety centres here in the south-east.

The work that our child safety officers do across this state cannot be understated. The contribution that they make to looking after our most vulnerable and providing alternative pathways for young people who are in less than safe and often neglectful environments is incredible. It places a heavy toll on many child safety officers and the teams that work with them. Therefore, at the outset it would be remiss of me not to thank all of those people who work so hard and so tirelessly. Many of them have been there for decades, while some last only a few years because of the heartache and challenges that go with the role. I thank every one of them.

This bill seeks to outline a pathway for more adoptions and it promotes the concept that adoption is an option. I refer to the department's media handout of June 30 last year in which child and family performance statistics were highlighted. Statistics listed under the heading 'Complexity' refer to the prevalence of risk factors within households where a child has experienced significant harm or was at risk of harm: 67 per cent of those parents had a current or past drug or alcohol problem; 56 per cent had a current or previously diagnosed mental illness; 54 per cent of those parents had a criminal history; 51 per cent had experienced domestic and family violence within the past year; and 43 per cent of those parents had been abused as a child. In fact, three out of every four households—75 per cent—had more than one of those risk factors compared to 70 per cent in the previous period that those figures were monitored. To me that highlights why a system of permanent guardianship or adoption as an option is important.

Every child needs and deserves a stable home. I recall as a young father being given advice by older and wiser owls of the day that the best thing you can do is provide your kids with a stable routine and a secure home environment so that they know where they belong, they know what the rules are and they have boundaries in their lives.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I note your role on the committee and in the statement of reservation you highlighted this very important statistic: almost 25 per cent of children in care have had at least six placements and six per cent, or 626 children, have had between 11 and 20 different placements. That sort of change does not provide a child with any sense of security or belonging. It subtly says to the child that they belong nowhere and that no-one wants them. However, there are many families that do want them. As recently as last year, as well as in previous years, people who have had a fostering role with young children have come to my office and they have pleaded with us and the department to grant

them guardianship. They have said that, while they would be happy to work with the birth parents of the children and provide access, they simply want the right to provide that child with a secure and permanent home environment, which is incredibly important.

I want to provide a little bit of context because sometimes we talk about these children as though there are just a few of them and sometimes we talk about them as though there are a lot of them. It is important to understand that, according to the last report on the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs website, 11,323 children are subject to orders that require them to live away from home. That is a lot of kids. I do not have the regional statistics, but on a pro-rata basis that means that on the Gold Coast about 2,000 kids—the entire school population of Southport State High School—are not living in their normal home environment. It is beholden on us as a government, as an opposition and as the parliament of Queensland to work much harder in this space to deliver better outcomes for our children.

To give a bit of a history lesson, when we were in government we initiated a program called fostering families. Three trial sites were nominated at the time. The program was about providing intensive family intervention to specifically target neglect. It was not about sexual abuse or physical abuse; it was about working with families where there was neglect or an inability to properly look after children. Over a period from about 2012 to 2014, three trials were conducted in different areas of the state. During that time we saw a 30 per cent drop in the number of children required to be removed from their families. I think that is significant. It really saddens me that we have not been able to pick up and run with more prevention programs such as fostering families to deal and work with families at the start of the problem rather than when, sadly, it has become too late.

Another thing that concerns me, and I am sure there is not a member in the House who does not share this concern, is the number of intakes that are received through the department responsible for child safety. That number peaked at June 2020 and I believe that it increased further during COVID. It represents about 353 phone calls or emails a day, which is about 15 phone calls or emails an hour, from people saying, 'I am really worried about a child at my school', 'I am really worried about a child with my next door neighbour' or 'I was at the shopping centre the other day and saw a family that I know and the kids are not getting the care or the support that they deserve.' I know it is easy for an outsider to look in and make all sorts of assertions and that is why they are investigated, but even after that about half of those reports of concern are actually substantiated and require some intervention from the department of child safety.

While I have some reservations around the hierarchy of principles that the bill is seeking to impose, I am certainly pleased that we are at least making some steps forward to develop legislation that will provide for more adoptions or, at the very least, longer term guardianship arrangements for some of our most vulnerable children. We do not want to cut them off entirely from their families, but when we look at the 11,323 children who are currently living away from home we know anecdotally that about 75 per cent of them have come from situations which would almost be prohibitive, if not impossible, to return them to in any normal circumstance. Therefore, we do need to look at more progressive ways to attend to the needs of our children.