




Speech By
Corrine McMillan

MEMBER FOR MANSFIELD

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CHILD PROTECTION REFORM AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms McMILLAN** (Mansfield—ALP) (11.55 am): I rise to speak on the Child Protection Reform and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2021. Firstly, I wish to thank the minister for her leadership of the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs. Those of us in this chamber who have served young people for their entire career understand the complexities that come with every child, with every situation, with every family. We know that every child, every family and their context is very different. The immense work that our department does day in, day out to support our most vulnerable children has always been admired by me and by the teaching profession across Queensland. We have always worked very closely with the department. We know of their work intimately, and we know of the complexity of their work with our students and their families. I also take this opportunity to thank the many organisations which work tirelessly to support our most vulnerable young people. Again, having worked firsthand with those organisations for more than 25 years, I understand the work that they do.

It is my firmly held belief that all children should be afforded the opportunity to have a voice in decisions that are made about them and their lives—their education, the way they spend their time, the way they negotiate what they need. It is absolutely imperative that our young children have a voice. It is incumbent on us as a government to facilitate children's views and wishes in the safest possible way. Involving young people in the decisions about their lives not only empowers them; it allows decision-makers to make better and more informed decisions about care arrangements. Whilst the committee notes the concerns from some stakeholders with respect to the reforms to the blue card assessments, the safety of children in care remains of paramount importance to this government.

On 17 September 2021, the committee invited stakeholders and subscribers to make written submissions to the bill, and the committee received 18 submissions. The committee received a written briefing on the bill on 23 September 2021 and a public briefing about the bill from the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs and the Department of Justice and Attorney-General on 27 September 2021.

During the inquiry, the committee heard compelling evidence from people directly experiencing the child protection system in Queensland. The committee is particularly appreciative of Mr Jake Shields, who is a fine young man and is a young consultant at Create Foundation, as well as the many others who spoke to their experiences of care at the public hearing in Brisbane on 15 October 2021. Mr Jake Shields shared with us that—

Participation is fundamentally important for young people in care.

Having experienced that himself, he was able to shed much light on his experience. He said—

They need to know that they are being listened to and they need to know that they have a say. As a kid in care I sometimes felt like a puppet and not in control about decisions in my life. No child or young person should feel like that. When I was in care I stopped going to my case plan meetings because I was not included in decisions that were being made and I felt like they were always telling me what I was doing wrong.

The committee took great heart in hearing Jake's thoughts and certainly we reflected in our recommendations many of the issues that Jake raised with our committee.

As we know, the objectives of the bill are to better support children and young people in care, and streamline, clarify and improve the processes. It includes three reform areas: reinforcing children's rights in the legislative framework, strengthening children's voices and decisions that affect them and streamlining, clarifying and improving the regulation of care.

The bill also proposed amendments to the Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) Act 2000 by obtaining and considering domestic violence information, imperative to our Queensland families, facilitating Queensland's participation in the Working with Children Check national reference system, and simplifying and streamlining the categories of regulated employment and regulated business that deal with licensed care services to better reflect the contemporary service delivery model used by licensees in discharging their functions.

The committee made three recommendations: the first is that the bill be passed. I am very happy to support the bill. The committee encouraged the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs to establish a process to ensure there is customary and age-appropriate participation of children in care in decision-making processes that affect them. I note that the opposition spokesperson for this bill made mention around how that will look in practical terms. I absolutely can see clearly how that will look in practical terms. Often I, as a principal and teacher, would have my young people chair meetings that were about them. So often our young person would set the agenda, whether that be about their learning, about their performance in assessments, or about their care arrangements. Often I would have the young person chair the meeting, set the agenda and invite relevant attendees. That is a classic example of what the minister talks about when she says we must empower our young people. We must scaffold their opportunities for empowerment and we must provide them opportunity to lead, and to lead the life that they wish for themselves.

The third recommendation was that the committee encourage the Department of Justice and Attorney-General to investigate the nuances and barriers regarding First Nations persons obtaining blue cards so as to improve access to employment. We know that housing and employment are significant factors for our young people, and if we refer to many theorists, one being Maslow and his hierarchy of needs, certainly housing and access to safe, secure employment in order for young people to be provided with their basic needs is essential.

On behalf of the committee, I thank those individuals and organisations who made written submissions on the bill and who attended the public hearings to meet and speak with the committee. I also thank the members of parliament who assisted the committee and attended public hearings. I thank our Parliamentary Service staff who always do a great job and are so committed and so supportive to the work of our committee. I thank the minister once again. I thank the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs, the Department of Justice and Attorney-General, the Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, the Torres Shire Council who provided tremendous input into the bill, and the communities of Mount Isa, Townsville, Cairns and Thursday Island who assisted the committee to understand the nuances in regional and remote Queensland and who gave up so much of their time that they would normally spend in their day-to-day work, so much of their time to work with our committee to ensure that this legislation is the very best that it can be. I commend this report to the House.