

**Question on Notice
No. 765
Asked on 24 May 2005**

MR S KNUTH asked the Minister for Child Safety (MR REYNOLDS)-

QUESTION:

With reference to children in care –

- (1) Since January 2004, what is the number of reported cases of suspected abuse of children that were in the care of foster carers?
- (2) Of those cases listed in (1), what action was taken in each instance and what is the number of children that remain in those foster homes?

ANSWER:

In January 2004, the Policy - *Responding to matters of concern raised in relation to the standards of care provided to children and young people in alternative care* was implemented within the department.

This policy outlines the requirements for responding to concerns about the standards of care provided to children and young people in alternative care.

The department currently records when a matter of concern is raised in relation to the care provided to children or young people in alternative care, and how it is responded to.

The Child Safety Service Centre (CSSC) determines how a matter of concern is responded to by assessing the level of harm experienced by the child/young person. The CSSC can respond to a matter of concern either through casework or by way of an Investigation and Assessment (Initial Assessment). All Initial Assessments involving carers are assigned a 24 hour response timeframe.

The department's assessment of a matter of concern, responded to by either a casework or initial assessment, always includes a comprehensive safety assessment of the child and their current placement. When conducting an assessment it is also important to identify all factors that may have contributed to the matter of concern, to ensure the department's response meets any identified needs for the child and carer.

The provision of casework services is an appropriate response when the concern/s about the standards of care provided to children or young people in alternative care indicate a breach of the Statement of Standards (section 122, *Child Protection Act 1999*), but are not at a level that constitutes a Child Protection Notification. Casework with children or young people, their families and carers is based on ongoing assessment, planning, implementation and review, in accordance with the requirements of the department's Case Management Framework. Examples of casework may include additional advice, support or training for a child or a carer.

A Child Protection Notification response to a matter of concern is appropriate when the concerns expressed identify that the child has or is at risk of suffering harm. The legislative definition of harm to a child, is any detrimental effect of a significant nature on the child's physical, psychological or emotional wellbeing. Harm can be caused by physical, psychological or emotional abuse or neglect; or sexual abuse or exploitation.

Where an Investigation and Assessment (Initial Assessment) response is required, it is assigned a high priority rating (24 hour response timeframe). This requires that the notification is responded to within 24 hours and that immediate action is taken to determine the child's current level of safety and to take any necessary actions to secure the child's safety, where the child is considered to be at imminent risk of harm.

The department's response to these matters is always determined by the child's best interests. Responses may include: (1) a review of the appropriateness of the placement to meet the child's needs; (2) an updated placement meeting with the carer to clarify the goals of the case plan and review/decide carer support and training needs specific to each child placed; (3) a review of the Foster Carer Agreement for the carer; and (4) an immediate review of the approval status of the carer where the nature of the substantiated harm and/or the risk of harm is considered very serious (that is the amendment, suspension and cancellation of an approval; (5) the immediate removal of the child from the carer's home if it is deemed that the child has been harmed or is at immediate risk of harm if the child were to remain in their current placement.

Departmental records indicate that, between January 2004 and May 2005, 730 distinct children were subject to a report of a matter of concern. Of these 730 children subject to a matter of concern, 631 were responded to by way of a child protection notification and 99 were responded to by way of a casework response. Of the 730 children subject to a matter of concern, 265 were removed from their placement. The children who remained in their placements were assessed as safe in the care of their foster parents.

Departmental practice requires that staff complete a holistic assessment in relation to all the children in a placement when a matter of concern is notified. This assessment will ensure that the protective and care needs of all the children placed with a carer are evaluated and an assessment in relation to the safety of all children in a placement is completed.

A number of internal and external mechanisms have been established to ensure that all matters of concern are responded to appropriately and in a timely manner. These mechanisms include the central review of matters of concern by the department's Service Support Unit to ensure that concerns expressed in relation to children in alternate care are responded to in accordance to departmental policy and practice.

A matter of concern which is responded to by way of an Investigation and Assessment also requires that departmental officers complete a Level 2 Critical Incident report to the Deputy Director-General. This ensures that any significant issues are assessed and followed up at the highest level.

The Department of Child Safety continues to audit Child Protection Notifications involving foster carers. The Case Review and Evaluation Branch has assumed the role of internal auditors following the release of Phase 1, Phase 2 and Phase 3 Foster Care Audit reports. The department is committed to ongoing auditing to ensure ongoing improvements in service delivery.

The audit that is undertaken includes a determination of the accuracy or otherwise of the assessment outcome for each notification and whether the action taken following substantiated notifications was appropriate for the circumstances in respect of both the subject child/ren and the foster carers.

In addition to the internal audit processes, the Commission for Children, Young People and Child Guardian has been established as an external monitoring body with respect to the wellbeing of children in out of home care. The Department of Child Safety currently provides information to the Commission in respect to all matters of concern for external auditing purposes, on a monthly basis.