

Question on Notice
No. 1024
Asked on Tuesday 7 August 2007

MR EVAN MOORHEAD MP asked the Minister for Child Safety (MS BOYLE)-

QUESTION:

Will she outline improvements to the child protection system since the 2004 Crime and Misconduct Commission Report?

ANSWER:

I thank the Member for his question and for his interest in this important issue. The Crime and Misconduct Commission's January 2004 Report *Protecting Children: An Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Foster Care* (CMC Inquiry) recommended machinery of government changes to create a separate department dedicated to children in need of protection. The new Department of Child Safety formally commenced operation on 20 September 2004 after extensive work to separate staff and infrastructure.

The Queensland Government has implemented all 110 recommendations arising from the CMC Inquiry and all 24 recommendations contained in the 2004 Foster Care Audit Report. The size and extent of the change that has been required to provide a cross-government approach to child protection should not be underestimated and work continues to build the capacity of communities and the non-government sector to support the safety of children.

This year's record operating budget of \$551.3 million is nearly \$50 million more than last year's budget of \$503 million. The Queensland Government is now spending three times more than in 2003–04 when the former Department of Families' operating budget for child protection was \$182.2 million. This demonstrates the Government's commitment to protecting children who are harmed or at risk of harm.

The department continues to develop and implement further enhancements to child protection legislation, policies, practices and services. Some of the major areas of improvement since 2004 include:

Staffing

- New positions were created and filled throughout the department to take the new child safety system forward. More than 80% of staff are now engaged in direct service delivery, a significant increase from the 52% reported in the CMC Inquiry.
- Incentive payments are being made available to attract staff to rural and remote areas.
- The new transfer-at-level policy prioritises transfers-at-level of eligible employees to their preferred location once they have served a designated period in specified rural or remote locations.
- Indigenous staff are highly valued and have provided enormous benefits for children coming into contact with the department. Additionally, they have also contributed to increasing the cultural awareness of departmental staff. To raise the profile and coordination of Indigenous issues across the department, new positions have been created in each zone and in the central office divisions, including a key position in the Office of the Director-General.

- Placement coordinators have been appointed in every zone to ensure the most appropriate placement is identified for each child entering out-of-home care.

Training

- Certificate IV Community Services (Protective Care) has been provided to 150 departmental staff and 50 staff from Recognised Entities. This program provides para-professional staff with a nationally recognised qualification in child protection.
- The introduction of regional on-the-job training for all permanent and temporary staff. Team Leaders, Senior Practitioners and Managers are also provided with training and networking opportunities.
- The department is committed to developing the capacity of non-government organisations and the non-government sector workforce. Joint training of departmental staff and employees from non-government organisations has proved very successful. The department is collaborating with universities and other training providers to develop a skills formation strategy to provide a future supply of skilled workers.

Practice

- The launch of the Practice Development and Support Branch is a key milestone in the continual improvement of child protection practice and the provision of support to frontline staff dealing with complex cases such as the impact of drug dependence on parenting ability and child protection outcomes. The branch provides:
 - child safety officers with the best information on practice from around the world;
 - gathers the latest research;
 - practical mentoring for senior practitioners and team leaders;
 - offers a phone helpline for child safety officers; and
 - reviews case plans to identify and showcase best practice.
- Indigenous Recognised Entity Services now participate in the key decisions about the lives of Indigenous children, ensuring a more informed and appropriate response to their specific needs. A range of initiatives to improve outcomes for Indigenous children have been adopted including the development and support of kinship carers; improvement of processes to support the cultural development of children placed with non-Indigenous carers and the enhancement of services to remote Indigenous communities.
- The Child Safety Practice Manual has been developed which details departmental policies and procedures to be observed in the performance of departmental duties.
- Structured Decision Making (SDM) tools are now used to assist in risk assessments and in identifying the strengths and needs of children and their families.
- The department is conducting a review of the SDM tools to check the screening of incoming cases, the threshold of departmental involvement and continued consistency with departmental legislation and policies.
- The department is also revising how the interagency forum, Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN), operates. The revision of SCAN policies and procedures will strengthen its ability to provide a cross-agency response to children with complex service needs.
- The Integrated Client Management System (ICMS) has been implemented and provides staff with ready access to the complete record of departmental involvement with children and their families and trials are being conducted to test IT products which will allow staff to remotely access the new client information management system and record case notes while visiting remote communities.

Rural and Remote Service Improvements

- In the Gulf, Cape York and Torres Strait, staff are working with communities to develop Recognised Entities to participate in decisions relating to Indigenous children. Financial support is provided to a peak body for these Recognised Entities to support their child protection practice and organisational capability. Improved service delivery is being provided through the construction of in-community placement houses and the development of the Gulf Child Safety Service Centre and branch offices in Weipa, Cooktown and Thursday Island.
- To ensure these offices are adequately staffed, dedicated human resources officers have been working in these areas to recruit staff with the goal of giving children in remote communities the same child protection service as received by any other child.

Support for Carers

- The department has introduced a range of new initiatives for foster carers including:
 - increased funding to the non-government sector to support foster carers and provide residential placements and services to children in need of protection;
 - the new fortnightly caring rates introduced from 1 January 2007. The new rates provided an increase for all carers as follows:

Age bracket	Previous average allowance	New average allowance	Increase
0-5	\$231.05	\$370.60	\$139.55
6-10	\$282.41	\$399.26	\$116.85
11+	\$339.68	\$434.02	\$94.34

- a foster and kinship support line, which is the first of its type in Australia. It operates seven days a week, providing behaviour support, counselling and referral to other support services; and
- all carers, including kinship carers, adult household members residing in, or regularly visiting, the foster carer's house, are now required to be screened for criminal and child protection histories and are provided with training and support.

Therapeutic Support

- The development of integrated service models such as therapeutic services, education support programs and health assessments are designed to ensure that children in care are provided with the same opportunities and support as other children to achieve their education and life goals.
- The department is progressing the design and procurement of two therapeutic residential in Townsville and Cairns. These residential will provide a safe therapeutic environment for 11 – 17 year old children subject to long term orders and will be occupied by children who are not able to be placed in family-based care due to their extreme and complex levels of need. A further two residential are planned for south east Queensland.

Standards

- Eleven services standards have been developed for both government and non-government provided services. Services, particularly residential services, are currently undergoing a licensing process which will provide the department and its clients with assurances about the quality of care provided.

Continued Improvements

- One Chance at Childhood - children only have one chance at childhood and, as Minister for the Department of Child Safety, I am committed to giving vulnerable children the best possible start to their lives. Current national and international research shows that babies and toddlers under two years of age, in particular, are at significant risk of physical, emotional, psychological and developmental harm due to their extreme vulnerability, their isolation and their inability to communicate through language. Recently, I approved funding to support a range of new and exciting initiatives. Staff of my department are actively working to establish a range of programs that will make a real difference in these critical early years.

Outcomes from Commission for Children, Young People and Child Guardian Audits Survey I

- In 2006 the Commission for Children, Young People and Child Guardian conducted a survey of children in out-of-home care. The survey established that 98 per cent of children in out-of-home care felt safe in their placement and 98.9 per cent felt their carer treated them well and it is this type of feedback from the children our system is designed to protect that we are striving to achieve.