

Question on Notice
No. 196
Asked on Wednesday, 27 February 2008.

MRS JULIE ATTWOOD asked the Minister for Child Safety and Minister for Women (MRS KEECH) -

QUESTION:

Will she advise her plans in relation to ensuring that the transition from children in care to parents is both planned and monitored?

ANSWER:

I thank the Member for her question and for her continuing interest in helping our most vulnerable children and young people.

Structured Decision Making, or SDM, tools are used by departmental staff at key points in the assessment and case planning phases, including investigation, assessment and reunification. The family reunification assessment tool guides decision-making about when it is appropriate and in a child's best interests to no longer work towards reunification. For example, the SDM tool will recommend if reunification efforts for a child be terminated when a young child (under three years of age) has been in out-of-home care for 18 out of the past 24 months, or after 12 continuous months of high risk of future abuse or neglect, poor parent-child contact or an unsafe home. This does not prevent stability planning earlier, nor does it prevent the Department from ruling out reunification at an earlier stage.

Babies and toddlers are a high priority for the Bligh government, which is why, in 2007, we initiated the \$12 million One Chance at Childhood program to boost the protection of this, the most vulnerable group, in the child protection system.

Under this initiative, specialist officers will be employed to:

- provide expert advice and specialist support in cases involving the most vulnerable babies and toddlers;
- ensure parents are linked in to the right support from government departments and non-government agencies; and
- advise on expectant mothers who have come to the Department's attention because there are risks to the health of the unborn baby.

Specialist officers will also focus on parents in situations where the Department has had to remove the baby or toddler. These parents will have access to assistance and be advised what measures must be in place before their child can be returned. This will only happen after careful assessment and planning.

Reunification decisions are never made lightly. As part of the One Chance at Childhood initiative, reunification panels are being developed to assist the Department's decision-making by providing expert, independent advice on whether or not to reunite a child with their parents.

Parents are being given every opportunity, through programs, counselling and support provided by my Department to gain the skills needed to have their children returned to them. The reunification panels will decide whether the parents have developed those skills and addressed their issues and whether returning the child to their parents is in the child's best interests. If, after a reasonable period of time and everyone's best efforts, a child cannot be safely returned home, then a permanent home will be found for the child.

Once a decision has been made to reunify a child, ongoing monitoring and contact with the child and family continues until the case is closed. The nature and frequency of the contact is determined by the most recent assessed risk level as scored by SDM Tools.