

CHILD PROTECTION — REPORT ON GOVERNMENT SERVICES

4951. Mr K.M. O'Donnell to the Minister for Child Protection:

I refer to the Annual Report on Government Services (RoGS) released between the 22 January and 1 February 2019, and note that Aboriginal children in Western Australia are placed with a relative, kin or other Aboriginal person in 60.1% of cases, compared to 65.2% nationally:

- (a) Why is WA below the national average for Aboriginal children being placed with a relative, kin or other Aboriginal person;
- (b) What strategies have been implemented to address this issue and ensure that Aboriginal children are placed in culturally appropriate settings and if no strategies have been implemented why not; and
- (c) Across WA (by suburb or electorate) what is the breakdown of Aboriginal children that are not placed with a relative, kin or other Aboriginal person?

Ms S.F. McGurk replied:

- (a) An overall increase in the number of children coming into care, the need to match carers to the specific needs of individual children and the natural attrition of existing carers means that it is not possible in all cases to place Aboriginal children with a relative, kin or another Aboriginal person. While the increase of Aboriginal children entering Out-of-Home Care has slowed, there remains a high need for carers from Aboriginal communities in both metropolitan and regional areas.

A unique challenge for WA is its large geographical size. Finding family members or a suitable and culturally appropriate care arrangement for Aboriginal children who are brought into care from rural and remote regions presents a challenge. Access to support services for carers and children in rural and remote areas can also be challenging, and this can impact on the long-term stability of a care arrangement.

- (b) The Department of Communities (Communities) is finalising its Stability and Connection Policy, to replace its permanency planning policy. The revised policy will align with all five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (the Principle) which has been adopted nationally. The five elements are:

Prevention – supporting Aboriginal families to care safely for their children

Partnership – ensuring the participation of Aboriginal community representatives in service design, delivery and individual case decisions

Placement – placing children in Out-of-Home Care in accordance with the Principle's placement hierarchy

Participation – ensuring the participation of children, parents and family members in decisions regarding the safety, belong and wellbeing of their children, and

Connection – maintaining and supporting connection to family, community, culture and country for children in Out-of-Home Care.

The Principle requires that wherever practicable and in a child's best interests, Communities will find a suitable placement for Aboriginal children and young people within the following order of priority:

- (1) with a member of their family
- (2) with an Aboriginal person in their community
- (3) with an Aboriginal person, or
- (4) with a non-Aboriginal person who is sensitive to their needs.

For those Aboriginal children who are not able to be placed with an Aboriginal carer, Communities supports and requires non-Aboriginal carers to be culturally responsive and facilitate the child to maintain their connection to family, community, culture and country. Such placements may be short-term arrangements while a more suitable placement can be arranged.

In 2018, the Family Care Support Service commenced providing support for family carers where there is a risk of children being moved to non-family care arrangements. Intensive in-home practical support is provided to stabilise and maintain family care arrangements. Aboriginal children and their family carers are prioritised under the service which includes supporting children and young people to remain connected to family, community, culture and country.

The Stability and Connection Policy will elevate the importance of relational permanence; or a child's ongoing connection to family, community, culture and country and the requirement for all Aboriginal children to

have cultural support plans to support this connection. This requirement will include that the cultural support plan is developed in partnership with family and other significant people in the child's community.

Communities also supports early intervention and prevention services which aim to reduce the number of Aboriginal children being placed in Out-of-Home Care. In 2018, the State Government allocated \$110 million over five years for the Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy (the Strategy), a coordinated response by Communities, other state government agencies and the community services sector, to divert children from the child protection system and prevent them from entering Out-of-Home Care.

Services under the Strategy are as follows:

Family Support Networks – intensive case management to support families who are most vulnerable to their children coming into care

Aboriginal In-Home Support Service – intensive in-home practical support to high-risk Aboriginal families in the Perth metropolitan area, and

Intensive Family Support Services – intensive in-home support to families across the State who are at most risk of child protection intervention, require support for reunification or to improve family wellbeing and keep their children safe at home.

- (c) As at 28 February 2019, there were 974 Aboriginal children in care who were not living with a relative, kin or another Aboriginal person in the following Communities' districts:

Armadale – 99
Cannington – 88
Fremantle – 46
Joondalup – 59
Midland – 94
Mirrabooka – 55
Peel – 24
Perth – 39
Rockingham – 29
East Kimberley – 72
Goldfields – 45
Great Southern – 34
Murchison – 82
Pilbara – 58
South West – 67
West Kimberley – 35
Wheatbelt – 48

The numbers provided are by Communities' district not by suburb or electorate. Communities manages children in the CEO's care by district. To provide numbers of children at the level of locality would result in them being potentially identifiable.