

Response by the Western Australian Government

to

Report

Select Committee on the Adequacy of Foster Care Assessment Procedures by the Department for Community Development

Background

The Legislative Council Select Committee on the Adequacy of Foster Care Assessment Procedures by the Department for Community Development was appointed on 21 September 2005 to inquire into and report on the adequacy of foster care procedures within the Department for Community Development (DCD). The Select Committee tabled its Report on 24 August 2006. The report makes 25 recommendations which focus on assessment, training and support for carers, resources for field workers and monitoring of practice standards.

Government Response

Since 2003 the Government has allocated additional resources to the Department for Community Development to enable it to strengthen the training and support provided to general and relative carers.

A key part of this reform process has been to ensure that assessment procedures are the same for relative carers as they are for general carers. Both general and relative carers must now undergo screening processes, while training is a priority to ensure newly registered carers are as prepared as possible for their critically important role and existing carers are kept up to date on current trends and practice.

There have been a number of reports and reviews of the Department for Community Development's policies and procedures which have been informing reforms for children in care.

In 2004 the Department for Community Development established the Duty of Care Unit and engaged independent consultants, Social Systems and Evaluation, to provide quality assurance for the Department's systems, practices and processes. The independent review highlighted both strengths in processes and weaknesses in the systems leading to increased risks for children.

In 2005 consultant and independent reviewer Gwenn Murray was commissioned to examine the circumstances surrounding 59 substantiated abuse in care allegations involving 57 children between 1 April 2004 and 12 September 2005. A report was released in December 2005 and made 43 recommendations. While it found no structural failure of the Department for Community Development's systems in the majority of cases reviewed, practice was sufficient but not "best practice".

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It highlighted the following issues:

- the importance of a quality, ongoing relationship between the caseworker and the child
- the importance of training, mentoring and support for carers
- the need for additional child protection, specialist and administrative staff
- the need for a range of placement options.

The Department for Community Development has been implementing the recommendations of both reports, supported by a Government increase in funding. The focus of the 2006-07 budget to the Department is increased attention to the protection of children and improved quality care for children.

This funding over the next four years includes \$37 million for 87 more staff, \$8.8 million for 20 new treatment-based placements (10 non-government) for high-need children and young people in care, \$23 million to relieve the cost and demand pressures of supporting children in care and \$6 million to train staff who work with children in need of protection and care and their families.

An additional \$120,000 has been allocated over four years to the Foster Care Association of WA to work with the Department for Community Development in recruiting, training and supporting foster carers. This is in addition to a continuation of the 2001 election commitment of \$200,000 over four years.

After the 2006-07 budget allocation, in September 2006 the Government allocated an additional \$51 million over four years for 133 staff in the area of child protection and children in care.

The Government, through the Department for Community Development, is committed to providing safe, nurturing and quality services to all children in care. The Government recognises the challenges it faces in the delivery of quality services as demands increase in the area of children in care.

The significant practice, process, organisational and cultural change which the Department for Community Development has undertaken over the last few years has been driven by a recognition of the need for and commitment to ongoing improved services to children in care.

Response to Select Committee's Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development consider extending the assessment process for all carers beyond their full registration by including in that process the assessments of the carers' performance during the first three times that they care for a child or young person at the Department's direction.

Response: **The Government recognises the need to extend assessment of carers beyond full registration. Regular reviews of carers are essential and conducted by qualified staff after the placement of each child and formally by annual review.**

Recommendation 2: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development ensure that the information session that is offered to prospective carers in the metropolitan area is also made available to prospective carers in the country. For this purpose, the Committee further recommends that the Department fully utilise the Western Australian Telecentre Network.

Response: **Agree.**
The Government, through the Department for Community Development, is investigating the viability of utilising the Western Australian Telecentre Network, to provide information sessions to prospective carers in the country, in addition to the information sessions already provided locally.

Recommendation 3: The majority of the Committee (Hon Robyn McSweeney and Hon Giz Watson MLCs) recommends that, wherever possible, a prospective carer who is being assessed by the Department for Community Development be assessed by two of the Department's officers and/or contractors.

Response: **Not supported.**
The Government agrees with the view of the Hon Sue Ellery MLC that the introduction of a much sharper focus on the carer assessment process (through the centralised Assessment Panel; assessment training for Senior Field Officers Care Services and the Fostering Services staff; increased support and supervision for Field Workers conducting assessments; increased qualification requirements for Assessors and the capacity to call on additional expertise where necessary, for example psychologists) should significantly improve this process.

Recommendation 4: The Committee recommends that all of the Department for Community Development's officers who conduct carer assessments:

- (a) receive the appropriate training and support in the new, more transparent and objective approach to carer assessments; and*

Response: The Department for Community Development has commenced a comprehensive process to determine the competency requirements for assessors and develop a competency based training package for delivery to Department for Community Development and non government sector assessors.

(b) be required to have a tertiary degree in social sciences, with a preference for a Bachelor of Social Work or equivalent, a Diploma in Training and Assessment, two years of post-graduate clinical experience, and industry-specific knowledge.

Response Not supported.
Relative Carer assessments are undertaken by field workers in District Offices who are selected for their competencies and supported by an extensive training programme to undertake the activities of the Department. To implement this recommendation would require a significant change in entry level qualifications to the Department for Community Development, which is not considered appropriate.

Recommendation 5: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development continue to ensure that a clinical psychologist is involved in the assessments of carers where the need arises.

Response: Agree.
Introduction of a much sharper focus on the carer assessment process, as described in the response to Recommendation 3, should significantly improve the assessment process. The process continues to include capacity to call on consultant expertise, including that of psychologists, where necessary.

Recommendation 6: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development investigate the possibility of having an experienced foster carer accompany an assessor on a home visit during all carer assessments.

Response: The Government agrees with foster carers being used to provide information and support to prospective and new carers.
The Government does not support a carer being present with the assessor during the home visit.
The possibility of involving carers in other ways will be explored.

The possibility of carer input in an advisory role into Panel Approval Recommendations is also being investigated.

Recommendation 7: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development:

(a) update the whole general foster carer assessment manual at least once every 12 months;

Response: It is the Government's view that an update of the general foster carer manual should occur on a needs basis as required. The manual is currently being updated to reflect a competency based assessment framework.

(b) ensure that the currency of the general foster carer assessment manual as a whole is always clearly indicated throughout the document; and

Response: Agree.

(c) ensure that the non-government agency providers of out-of-home care are provided with, or have access to, a current version of the general foster carer assessment manual at all times.

Response: Agree.

Recommendation 8: The Committee notes the complexities of relative care (as discussed in paragraphs 3.75 to 3.77 of this Report) but recommends that the Department for Community Development ensure that, as far as practicable, the same level of scrutiny and safeguards are applied to both general foster carer and relative carer assessments.

Response: The *Children and Community Services Regulations 2006* identifies the criteria for approval of all carers. The requirements apply equally to both general and relative carers.

Recommendation 9: The Committee recommends that, where a child or young person is placed with, and remains in the care of, a relative carer prior to the carer's full registration, the Department for Community Development uses every effort to ensure that:

(a) the screening of the relative carer is completed as soon as practicable after the child or young person is first placed with the relative carer; and

Response: Agree.

(b) *the carer's full assessment is completed as quickly as practicable, and, in any event, in less than 90 days after the child or young person is first placed with the relative carer.*

Response: **Agree.**

Recommendation 10: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development investigate the possibility of requiring carers registered with the Department to complete a minimum of two training modules every 12 months as a condition of their annual renewal of registration.

Response: **Agree.**

Recommendation 11: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development investigate the possibility of providing training to any person who is residing with a departmental carer while that carer is providing foster care.

Response: **It is not feasible to extend training to all people in the carers household.**

The Foster Care Association is currently undertaking joint research with UWA regarding the impact on carer's children of having foster children in the home.

The outcomes of this research, when available, can be used to give direction to planning and offering training, information and support to the children of carers.

Recommendation 12: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development's Standards Monitoring Unit and the Advocate for Children in Care monitor the Department's compliance with the care plan requirements under the Children and Community Services Act 2004 and the Department's internal policies.

Response: **It is agreed that compliance with care plan requirements needs to be monitored. Monitoring compliance is a shared responsibility already at many levels in the Department, including - Team Leaders, District Managers, Senior Practice Development Officers, Standards Monitoring Unit, Advocate for Children in Care, Directors and Executive Directors for service delivery.**

Recommendation 13: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development consider establishing a Carer Support Worker position in every District Office in the State.

Response: Some District Offices in the Department for Community Development already have Carer Support Workers. The Government will give consideration to expanding the current level of worker support to carers.

Recommendation 14: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development review the benchmark ratio of one carer support officer for every 50 carers within 12 months after the Department has completed its planned increase in permanent support staff positions.

Response: The Government is working towards employing specialist workers and Placement Officers to support carers at a ratio of 1:50.

Recommendation 15: The Committee recommends that the Government consider facilitating a broader community discussion and debate on fostering in the context of volunteering.

Response: Agree.
A public campaign by the Department for Community Development is being developed to promote community awareness of fostering.

Recommendation 16: The Committee recommends that the Government continue to allocate additional resources for supporting families and for reducing the demand for out-of-home care.

Response: Agree.

Recommendation 17: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development consider:

(a) offering the Start-Up Training more frequently; and
Response: Agree.

(b) prohibiting new Field Workers from undertaking certain aspects of their duties until they have received the full Start-Up Training.

Response: Inexperienced workers must complete Start Up training prior to being allocated cases for management. They can be co-workers and be given tasks arising from cases as long as they are closely supervised. New experienced workers must complete the initial one week induction before being allocated cases for management. This Induction Form must be registered with Human Resources. These workers should then attend relevant modules of Start Up to ensure they are trained in departmental policy and practice.

Recommendation 18: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development ensure that managers or Team Leaders brief every new Field Worker who is contracted for three months or less on the Department's philosophies and policies.

Response: Agree.

Recommendation 19: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development develop a strategy to ensure that all of its workers are appropriately trained in cultural awareness.

Response: Training in cultural awareness is part of the Start-Up training for field workers.

Recommendation 20: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development develop a plan to better attract and retain Field Workers.

Response: Agree.

Recommendation 21: The Committee recommends that the Advocate for Children in Care be assisted by staff who have a wide range of specialised skills and experiences.

Response: Agree.

Recommendation 22: The Committee recommends that:

(a) the Department for Community Development consider ways in which its policies, procedures and practices in identifying abuse in care can be clarified and streamlined for its workers; and

Response: Agree.

(b) in this process, the Department give due consideration to the views and suggestions of its workers.

Response: Agree.

Recommendation 23: The Committee recommends that, before making a decision affecting a child or young person in care, the Department for Community Development take due consideration of the views and suggestions of any government or non-government agency involved with the care of that child or young person.

Response: The Government acknowledges that it is important to give due consideration to the views and suggestions of any government or non-government agency involved with the care of a child or young person. The child's best interests must be paramount at all times when making a decision that affects a child or young person.

Recommendation 24: The Committee recommends that the Department for Community Development investigate the possibility of non-government agencies providing Indigenous placement services in regional areas with high Indigenous populations.

Response: Agree.

Recommendation 25: The majority of the Committee (Hon Robyn McSweeney and Hon Giz Watson MLCs) recommends that an independent review of the Department for Community Development's response to the Committee's recommendations and the recommendations of the report by Ms Gwen Murrary, A duty of care to children and young people in Western Australia – Report on the quality assurance and review of substantiated allegations of abuse in care – 1 April 2004 to 12 September 2005, be conducted within two years.

Response: Not supported.

The Government agrees with the view of the Hon Sue Ellery MLC that the two year period is unreasonable, given that some of the Government's initiatives in the 2006/2007 State Budget are to be rolled out over a longer period.

