

Commissioner's speech for the Foster Care Queensland Conference Dinner 2006

Acknowledgements:

Mr Bryan Smith – President FCQ & MC
Councillor Jenny Hill, Townsville
Honoured guests
Ladies & gentlemen

Good evening

I'd like to start by thanking Foster Care Queensland for inviting me to speak tonight and by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we stand.

I'm honoured to be here to take part in a conference which supports and celebrates Queensland foster carers. I would like to draw special attention to the work done by Foster Care Queensland in providing feedback and comments for the Commission's programs. This assistance is most appreciated.

You and I are similar, as we do work unlike anyone else for Queensland children and young people.

We face challenges which can seem insurmountable at times, but we know when our jobs are done well, the benefits for children and young people can be priceless.

You have a much more 'hands-on' role in caring for children and young people involving all members of your families, including the unsung heroes - your own children.

It's one that requires giving at a very personal level, to what can be some very challenging young people on a 24 / 7 basis.

My engagement with young people is more systemic – focussing on overseeing standards of care, services provided and outcomes for children and young people in out of home care.

As you would know, the blue card system was expanded on 31 May this year to include foster and kinship carers, and adult members of their household.

This is in keeping with the Government's commitment to the safety and protection of children in Queensland.

The Commission has been working closely with the Department of Child Safety to get this screening in place, and we have provided information sessions about the Working with Children Check.

Under these arrangements, I'm sure you're all aware that existing carers and adult members of their household who did not previously require a blue card, have until 30 November 2006 to sort out your application.

New carers and adult members of their household who started foster caring work after 31 May 2006 now need a blue card before they provide care.

To help you meet these new legislative requirements Officers from the Commission and the Department have been available here today to answer any questions you have about the Working with Children Check, and to help carers complete your application forms.

They will also be available between 8.30am and 2.00pm tomorrow, when information kits will be available at the Commission's booth.

But as I'm sure you know, the Commission does more than issue blue cards.

As I said, we monitor and report on the safety and wellbeing of all children in Queensland and identify factors affecting their vulnerability.

In addition, we help organisations providing essential services or those focussed on the development of children, to strengthen their child safety safeguards by having written risk management strategies in place.

I'm responsible for ensuring that the Commission performs effectively as Queensland's leading independent statutory body with a mandate to promote and protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people.

My vision is for a better life for children and young people in Queensland, particularly those most vulnerable.

My mission is to improve their safety and well being, particularly for:

- those in, or who may enter, out-of-home care or detention
- those who have no appropriate person to act on their behalf
- those not able to protect their own rights, interests and well being, and/or
- those disadvantaged because of disability, geographic isolation, homelessness or poverty.

In performing this role I actively consult children and young people to promote their participation in decisions affecting them.

I listen to and seriously consider their concerns, views and wishes.

To achieve this, the Commission is working hard to be more accessible to children, and we have initiatives in place to ensure our staff are sensitive to the cultural identity and values of children, in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

I also regularly consult other advocacy entities, complaints agencies, service providers and other organisations concerned with the rights, interests and wellbeing of children in this state.

I'm committed (as required under our Act) to working co-operatively with service providers to help build their capacity to meet the needs of children in the child safety system.

As already stated – your organisation has been particularly helpful and is a member of our Community Visitor Advisory Committee, set up to assist us shape the focus of our work in this regard.

The Commission oversees what is happening for children and young people in out of home care by:

- assessing information collected direct from children and young people by our community visitors
- from our complaints service
- from our investigations and review work on specific service provision concerns
- from direct contact with service providers, and
- from our child death review responsibilities.

You can get a clear picture of what we do from the statutory and other reports the Commission releases, which are available on our website. I also have some hard copies which I brought for you tonight.

This reporting aims to foster greater transparency and accountability of the child safety system - of which you form an integral and extensive part.

These reports focus on outcomes for children and young people and serve to inform the community and government about what is working well and which areas need improvement.

As I see it, foster carers do a great job in:

- parenting young people who have often had very difficult life experiences
- co-ordinating your blended families
- opening your homes to scrutiny and a variety of visitors
- stretching family resources
- negotiating red tape, and
- saying goodbye if the time comes for children to be reunited safely with their natural families.

I admire all of you as I think these are all extremely generous and difficult things to do.

Some foster carers also experience the tragedy of losing a child in their care.

In 2005 to 2006, five Queensland children and young people died in foster care, all from natural causes. I offer my condolences to the foster families who have suffered this tragedy.

As the Commissioner, one of the most challenging parts of my role is how to receive and represent the views and wishes of children and young people in out-of-home care.

They are a traditionally disempowered group who have the greatest capacity of all stakeholders to tell us what is right and what is wrong with the child safety system.

Tonight, I'd like to tell you how the Commission is capturing their views and I would like to report to you what has been recorded.

As you'd know, the recent reforms to the child safety system expanded the Community Visitor Program to include visits to children in your homes in addition to those living in residential facilities and detention centres.

As a result, Community Visitors now regularly visit most children and young people in care, advocate on their behalf and report about the standards of care that they are receiving.

From these reports I can see the views of these children and young people as a group, which assists me to proactively identify systemic success stories and problems.

I can report that over the past 12 months, Community Visitors visited around 5000 children and young people in the child safety and juvenile justice systems.

The issue most frequently raised was children and young people wanting more support from departmental officers.

Only two percent of all concerns raised with Community Visitors were unable to be resolved locally or required a formal referral to the Department of Child Safety, Crime and Misconduct Commission and/or Queensland Police.

The 2006 Child Guardian Report, to be published in April next year, will report on over 35,000 visits to children this calendar year.

The work in this area has been further informed by our survey conducted earlier this year, to find out what children and young people in care really think about the system.

The views of around 31% of all children living in Queensland foster care and residential facilities were gathered.

This was a landmark survey, as it provided the first large-scale, balanced view of out-of-home care through the eyes of those experiencing it. No other Australian jurisdiction has undertaken such a survey.

It also demonstrated to children and young people that their views can make a real difference in improving Queensland's child safety system.

Children's responses to the survey about their experience of foster care were very encouraging.

I was particularly pleased to learn about positive findings on a system level, and am happy to be able to share them with you tonight.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank you and other Queensland foster carers for supporting the survey.

Generally, foster carers responded to the young children's survey on their behalf, while 5 to 8 year old children were assisted by Community Visitors, and young people aged 9 – 18 years responded by themselves.

One of the most significant findings was that 98% of the children and young people surveyed stated they felt safe in their current placement.

This figure correlates with reports from Community Visitors, who identified that only 2% of concerns were serious enough to require formal follow-up by the Commission, or formal referral to another service provider.

The majority of children and young people felt their lives had improved since coming into care, with around 90% of them indicating they felt they were better off since entering care.

Some of the comments about why children and young people felt safe included:

'No one harasses me here. No one annoys me here. I don't get bullied, don't get pushed and shoved.'

'This family is a very caring home.'

Comments made by children and young people about the benefits of being in out-of-home care included being supported by carers, having a good lifestyle, having possessions or luxuries and having contact with friends.

Specific comments were:

'Getting cared about. Being listened to. Being fed'

'I'm doing great things at school'

Other positive responses showed **98.9%** of young people surveyed stated that they felt that their foster carer treated them well.

84.5% of young people surveyed stated that things had improved for them in the last 12 months, saying things like:

'They have improved because I am placed with my current carer.'

'I'm treated with more respect. I'm happy most of the time.'

In addition, around 95% of young people and 93% of children said the rules and discipline at their placement were reasonable; and 94% of young people and 93% of children said their possessions were treated with respect at their placement.

There were some concerns expressed by the children and young people around the decisions made about their lives.

Their views will help me focus my work on how to further improve the wellbeing of children and young people in the next three years.

A key issue was young people feeling they didn't have 'much say' or had 'no say at all' in statutory decisions involving them- with 52% stating they felt this way.

Also, 46.5% of young people advised that statutory decisions made about them were explained to them 'not much' or 'not at all'.

This concerns me, because children who are taken seriously are more likely to know they can influence their own lives, respect the rights of others and be more resilient, empathetic, confident and trusting.

Another important issue was case planning.

11.6% of young people surveyed said that they didn't have a case plan, and over **62%** said that they **didn't know** if they had one.

Of those who did report having a case plan (around a quarter of those surveyed), 82% reported that they didn't know what was in the plan.

I was also concerned that carers reported that 13.8% of young children had an unresolved health issue, and 6.7% of young people reported having an unresolved health issue.

When asked what they would most like to see improved or changed to make the system better, young people said they'd like:

- more input in decision making
- for people to listen, and
- to have a permanent caseworker and more contact with their Child Safety Officer.

The survey also highlights the desire by many of these children and young people to be 'normal' when asked how the child safety system could be better.

Examples include:

'...so we can be able to act more like a normal kid would.'

'Do normal things that other kids get to do.'

Of those surveyed, nearly 23% of young people and around 29% of children identified as being Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander.

This reinforces the need for us to stay focussed on improving outcomes for Indigenous children and young people.

Key areas of difference between these children and other respondents included:

- Aboriginal young people being less likely to report that they can contact their Child Safety Officer when needed
- both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people being more likely to report having unresolved issues at school, and
- Torres Strait Islander young people indicating they were significantly less happy in their current placement than other young people.

The cultural appropriateness of placements for Indigenous children and young people is of particular concern for me.

I have a statutory responsibility to monitor the Department of Child Safety's compliance with the Indigenous Child Placement Principle.

Queensland has a poor history in making this Principle a reality for children and young people.

For those unfamiliar with the Indigenous Child Placement Principle, it is a statutory principle designed to ensure that Indigenous children and young people can be raised in their own culture, and understand the importance and value of family, extended family and kinship networks.

The Commission has recently started a project to check on how the principle is being applied, and how it is working for our Indigenous children and young people.

The review will consider whether all Indigenous placement options are being sought and considered, and whether the recognised Indigenous entities are being consulted in the process.

This aims to examine how Indigenous children and young people in out-of-home care are maintaining and developing connections with family and communities, and to identify how to make family and community connections stronger.

A report on this review will be completed in 2007.

One of the initial challenges between the Commission and Foster Care Queensland is to work out what more can be done to 'normalise' the foster care experience for children and young people.

We'll be considering this issue carefully at the Commission, and will talk with children and young people about how to achieve this goal.

Another initiative which will directly affect the children and young people who you care for is our monitoring of Queensland's Health's new 'health passport' for children in care.

This will mean children and young people will have a thorough health assessment when they first enter care, and important health information will go with them in the form of a 'passport' while they are in the child safety system.

The passport will include the health information carers need to provide effective day-to-day care.

But my primary focus has to be involving children and young people themselves in helping us to continue to improve the system.

How we involve children and young people in creating better systems is a challenge we are currently working on.

We're developing a toolbox of strategies to engage children and young people in regular, meaningful consultation about how the Commission performs its role and what specific issues we should tackle.

This will include developing a series of measures to capture the performance of the child safety system from the perspective of children and young people.

For example, we have identified the need to evaluate the social 'connectiveness' of children and young people.

Our survey showed children and young people have strong feelings about their ability to take part in extra-curricular activities while in out-of-home care, largely though, the feedback from children and young people about what is good about the child safety system was a firm vote of confidence for Queensland's foster carers.

When the going gets difficult, I encourage you to remember the very real and positive change that can occur in a child's life because of good foster care.

This is best summarised by one of the young people who responded to the survey. She said the best thing about her foster carer was:

'I'm not afraid to come home she respects me with love it feels like home and I am so happy here.'

This kind of outcome - which you deliver - is priceless.

Thank you.