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People  
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**Information Forum with Key Community  
Stakeholders**

**Child Guardian Report:  
Child Protection System 2009–10**

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## Introduction

Welcome and thank you for your interest in the work of the Commission. I am delighted to discuss with you the findings from the Commission's latest Child Guardian report on service delivery outcomes for children and young people in the child protection system.

For those whom I have not met personally, I am Elizabeth Fraser – the current Commissioner and Child Guardian in Queensland, a role I have undertaken since January 2005.

In the spirit of reconciliation, I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we are gathered for today's briefing, and paying my respects to Elders, past and present.

I would also like to acknowledge you all, as key representatives from the non-government sector.

Each of you play an important role in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of Queensland's vulnerable children and young people, whether it is through:

- providing support services to children and young people,
- assisting those who require an out-of-home care placement,
- maintaining a child's relationship with their family and community, or
- providing a collective voice for those who cannot advocate for themselves.

You will be aware that my role in the child protection system is about providing effective oversight services and this is achieved through my various Child Guardian functions.

One of the most important aspects of this role is to report the findings of my work to those who are responsible for providing child protection services to children.

This allows us to better understand the impacts on children and how service delivery can be improved and made more sustainable, and most importantly act in the best interests of the young people involved.

I hope that the findings of this report, that I am summarising today, will confirm and enhance your understanding of the current systemic issues affecting children within the system and assist you in your ongoing advocacy to protect Queensland's most vulnerable children.

There are five areas that I will cover in my presentation today.

Firstly, I will provide a quick summary of my Child Guardian responsibilities in overseeing the child protection system.

Secondly, I will describe the evidence base for the Child Guardian Report I am discussing today.

Thirdly, I will provide an overview of the Report findings, derived from the 2009-10 financial year, and finally, I will share some thoughts with you as to the potential uses of the Report's evidence base, as well as the future direction for my reporting about the child protection system.

### **The role of the Child Guardian**

The Child Guardian and its unique role in overseeing the child protection system has been a key responsibility of the Commission and me in particular for over seven years.

Many of you will remember the 2004 CMC Inquiry into Abuse in Foster Care as the catalyst for the most significant reform period for the child protection system in Queensland's history.

The Inquiry shaped the child protection system into what it is today, one that my evidence shows, is now better placed to uphold the rights and needs of those in contact with the child protection system.

The Commission has worked to amend legislation, and establish effective policies and procedures as part of my role in developing effective oversight mechanisms for the system to safeguard those who rely on its services.

These mechanisms have evolved over the last seven years and are now fully embedded in Commission practice.

Together with our collaboration with external stakeholders, these strategies are producing positive outcomes for Queensland's children.

Such mechanisms include, monitoring and investigating service delivery, surveying children and young people in out-of-home care, resolving complaints, advocating about laws, policies and practices and regularly and frequently visiting children and young people in out-of-home care.

One of my key Child Guardian functions is to produce evidence-based public reports on how the system is performing to protect children and identifying areas where improvements are still needed.

### **Child Guardian Report 2009-10 evidence base**

Every Child Guardian Report on the child protection system incorporates systemic data collected through the performance of my Child Guardian activities,

and analyses trends to provide an independent account of the outcomes achieved for children in the child protection system. This report is no different.

The Report points to areas of service delivery that have improved over recent years and seeks to drive action where there is scope for better outcomes to be achieved.

The evidence presented in this Child Guardian Report has been drawn from a number of my Child Guardian functions just mentioned, including:

- 21, 985 individual community visitor reports (completed between January – June 2010) assessing the safety and wellbeing of 6351 children in out-of-home care
- 14, 518 service delivery issues identified for children and young people in out-of-home care using the Commission's new reporting and information management system, Jigsaw
- Survey responses from 1950 children and young people in out-of-home care, and
- assessing 82 child death case review reports conducted by the independent Child Death Case Review Committee.

In addition to the Commission's own sourced/independent data about the circumstances of children in care, the Report also draws on select high priority performance data obtained from the Department of Communities, analysed across a number of variables.

My officers work with the Department each year to obtain performance data, and the co-operation and efforts of the Department and its staff who provide these data must be acknowledged.

In some areas the scope of data is still being negotiated for future reports. Over the past seven years my interest has been to increasingly reference outcome data rather than input complaints and activity data, only so we can over time achieve a more meaningful understanding of the performance of the System and what factors correlate to achieve positives for children.

### **The puzzle diagram**

Most of you are familiar with the Commission's Key Outcome Indicator Jigsaw puzzle, which is the framework we use to organise and communicate information about the current performance of the child protection system.

There are 10 puzzle pieces; each representing an important area of child protection service delivery and the essential supports for children and young people in the child protection system.

The framework was the subject of extensive consultation during its development

and it aligns closely with the national framework recently agreed for reporting against by all jurisdictions. Queensland's monitoring arrangements are unique and very robust as they enable the correlation of administrative data from service providers with that independently sourced by the Commission's Community Visitors and surveys.

I would now like to spend some time discussing the key findings for 2009-10 against each of the 10 Key Outcome Indicators.

### **Effective assessment**

An effective and timely assessment of a child's protective needs is integral to making an informed decision about the child's future risk of harm and the type, if any, of ongoing intervention needed to address the child's safety and wellbeing.

This is a service delivery area that has been an area concern for some time now.

In mid-2006, almost 12, 000 Investigation and Assessments were outstanding state-wide.

My 2008-09 Child Guardian Report outlined that the number of outstanding Investigation and Assessments had dropped significantly by mid-2009 to 3000.

The focus of my data collection has now shifted to determining whether safety concerns about children and young people are being investigated by the Department in a timely manner.

Data indicates that overall response times to Investigation and Assessments remain low, with 32% of Investigation and Assessments being responded to in line with the timeframes outlined in the Department's policies and procedures.

Importantly, the Department is prioritising those children and young people who are most at-risk.

In 2009-10, 76% of 24-hour Investigation and Assessments were responded to within the required timeframe.

It is clear that further improvements are needed in this critical area of service delivery, and I will be working with the Department in the year ahead to that effect.

### **Appropriate Interventions**

The second Key Outcome Indicator measures the extent to which early intervention services address risk factors present in a family.

In the best case scenario, early interventions will act as a safety net to prevent the child from progressing further into the child protection system.

The Commission is still developing its evidence-base in relation to this Indicator, as the secondary service delivery system becomes more able to report systemically about its performance.

Since 2008-09, the Commission has gathered data about Referral for Active Intervention services, and the number of families engaging in the services has increased from 980 to 1824.

It's positive to see that a high percentage of families are showing improvements in presenting risk factors on completion of their case plan.

### **Safety of children and young people in out-of-home care**

'Safety' remains a critical indicator of the system that must be closely watched, simply because the significance of removing children from their biological families must be countered by a significant improvement in their safety and wellbeing.

Last year, I reported that the improvement in rates of children experiencing a substantiated instance of abuse in care, had remained low and stable over the last few years.

This year, the trend continues, where the percentage of children and young people in out-of-home care during 2009-10 who experienced substantiated harm or risk of harm was 2.4%.

This figure correlates strongly with data from my successive surveys of children and young people in foster care, which I released in 2008 and 2010 and which confirm that 98% of children and young people feel safe in their placement.

These figures about safety are significant. They tell us that the service system is far better placed now, than in previous years, to not only provide safe out-of-home care to children and young people, but to assess the true extent of any problems that arise and to respond in a measured and targeted way.

### **Stable out-of-home care**

The need for children in out-of-home care to have stability in their placements is widely acknowledged.

The Commission not only measures stability by the number of placement changes a child experiences, but by reviewing other data including the continuity of a child's relationship with their school, community and other significant support people in their lives.

You can see by looking at the trend data, that there has been a small increase in the number of children experiencing between four and seven placements in out-of-home care.

This has been a minor shift over the last three years, and one the Commission will continue to monitor and discuss with service providers.

Additionally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience instability issues at a higher rate than non-Indigenous children. This includes across measures of self-placing and absconding, and the amount of contact the child has with their Child Safety Officer.

A breakdown of this data across Queensland shows a higher prevalence of these issues in the far northern, and central zones, which suggests this issue is related to service availability in the more remote areas of our state.

### **Individual needs met**

A key tool the Department uses to ensure the individual needs of children in out-of-home care are met, is the child's case plan.

In 2009-10 I completed a major investigation about compliance with case planning alongside other mandatory and essential services.

I made a number of recommendations in the audit, including in relation to additional training and development for frontline departmental officers.

The Department of Communities recently advised that it is has implemented or is working towards implementing the majority of the audit's recommendations.

The Commission will continue to work with the Department in order to achieve full implementation of these recommendations.

Encouragingly, I can report that at 30 June 2010, 93.5% of children in out-of-home care had a case plan, and over 77.4% of children had a current case plan (meaning their case plan had been reviewed within 6 months).

This is the first time that the Department has been able to provide me with these figures and the results look very promising.

I look forward to monitoring this data over time to observe trends and their correlation with benefits for young people.

## **Best education possible**

My Child Guardian Report highlights that in general the children and young people who are in care perform significantly worse than other Queensland students in regards to their education and gives rise to the need for comprehensive Education Support Planning.

Fortunately I can report that, since 2007-08, the percentage of eligible children and young people with an Education Support Plan has increased from 76% to 83.4%.

I believe this is a good example of how the Department of Communities and the Department of Education and Training, are forging stronger relationships and working together better for the benefit of children and young people in out-of-home care.

## **Best health possible**

A key requirement of the child protection system is the ability to provide health services promptly if needs arise.

Encouragingly, my Community Visitors reported in 2009-10 that only 6% of children visited had an unmet health need.

For those 6% of children who had an ongoing health need, a range of barriers to receiving services were identified.

I should note here, that when my Community Visitors identify an issue for a child they may undertake a number of actions depending on the level of significance of the issue and the level of risk to the child.

Typically, in relation to an issue raised about an ongoing health need, the Community Visitor will raise and seek resolution with appropriate stakeholders who have the responsibility and capacity to take action to address it.

Community Visitors also have the option of escalating the concern if the issue remains unaddressed.

Another key requirement of the child protection system is the ability to identify and provide children in out-of-home care with preventative health services.

One way in which the Commission can measure this is by analysing the number of children with a current Child Health Passport, which is the primary mechanism for identifying, co-ordinating and facilitating services to meet the health needs of children in out-of-home care.

The Department cannot currently report on the number of children with a current health passport.

As this is a critical area of service delivery, I will continue to work with the Department to facilitate future reporting, and in the meantime, will rely on my internal data sources to measure the health needs of children in out-of-home care.

### **Special needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children**

Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain over-represented at each phase of the child protection system.

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children subject to a substantiated notification increased 1.5% over the past reporting period.

Conversely, in the same period, the rates of non-Indigenous substantiations decreased by 9%.

Additionally, in 2009-10, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living away from home increased by nearly 8%, while the equivalent measure for non-Indigenous children increased by only 0.3%.

These ongoing trends highlight the importance of the State and national governments' commitment to closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people.

Progress in outcomes will continue to be monitored closely and reported by the Child Guardian, and the findings will underpin my systemic advocacy.

### **Successful reunifications**

In 2009-10, the number of children known to my Community Visitor Program who were reunified with their family was 859.

The Commission is working with the Department to be able to track whether reunified children re-enter the child protection system via a Child Concern Report or Notification. This will enable us to measure the success and permanency of reunifications across the State.

### **Transition from care**

Transition from care continues to be a key area of interest for those advocating for the rights of young people in out-of-home care, and rightly so.

The government has a responsibility to not only provide safe and appropriate care for children and young people under the custody and guardianship of the chief executive, but to provide them with the skills to live independently and to tackle what life brings after they turn 18.

This is particularly important as many young people transitioning from care do not have the support mechanisms and family relationships that other young people in Queensland have and rely upon in early adulthood.

For the first time this year, the Department was able to provide me with the percentage of young people in out-of-home care for whom transition from care planning had occurred.

At 30 June 2010, transition from care planning had occurred for 56% of young people aged 15 years and over.

There is obviously room for improvement in this area and I will be continuing to advocate with the Department about the need for comprehensive plans for all young people aged 15 years and over.

The fact that my Community Visitors reported to me that 82% of young people aged 15 years and over reported they felt ready to transition from out-of-home care somewhat alleviates my concern; however the importance of proper transition planning is not negated by this figure.

I remain concerned at the paucity of information we have about the post care realities for these young people and the limited and inconsistent levels of support made available for these young people after they turn 18. I believe this is something the broader community needs to address.

I look forward to working with the Department and others about this key service delivery area in the year ahead.

### **Potential uses of the report**

I have highlighted only a few of the key findings of my most recent Child Guardian Report, including that there are a number of areas of improvement in the child protection system. This demonstrates that the hard work of stakeholders across Queensland is resulting in better outcomes for children.

I have also highlighted a number of areas where scope for improvement exists. It is these service delivery areas that will be the focus for my work and advocacy in the year ahead.

There are a number of avenues I can pursue to enhance service delivery and improve outcomes for children, which include:

- publically reporting about the current status of the child protection system
- preparing policy submissions to stakeholders
- using my monitoring powers and investigation powers to further delve into issues raised and to make formal recommendations where necessary, and
- regularly linking with and advocating to service providers and stakeholders to promote key messages and broker solutions to emerging problems.

The issues that have been identified will be closely monitored by my officers, and I will take action when necessary, within the scope of my powers, to enhance service delivery and outcomes for children.

I will also report back on the progress of these in future publications.

I urge you to reflect on the role you and your organisations play within the child protection system, and to think about how you can use the evidence in this Report to help further the important work you do.

These responsibilities may be to provide direct services to children and young people, to develop or evaluate policy and programs, to advocate for children and young people, or to conduct research or teach in an academic context.

### **Future Reporting**

I would like to also mention the future of my Child Guardian Reports.

I am aware that we are increasingly moving towards an online world, one of the benefits of which is that important resources are a mere click away.

My aim is to adapt my Child Guardian reporting so that it is web-based, meaning more current, interactive and easy to access for the audience, and I'd appreciate any feedback you have about my plans to do this.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, I would like to reflect on the advances made since 2004 and draw your attention to our focus for the future.

This report, the fifth in the Child Guardian Report series, illustrates that there have been important gains in the last seven years post the CMC inquiry.

It is evidence that government and related service delivery partners have made a significant investment and contribution to the ongoing safety and wellbeing of Queensland children.

However, in order to ensure the child protection system continues to focus on improvement and achieving the best possible outcomes for these young people,

the focus must remain on early identification of systemic failings, raising levels of wellbeing, prevention and supporting children and young people's participation in decisions that affect their lives.

It is vital that we continue to strive to hear the voices of these children in a climate of political change and potential service delivery reforms.

As Child Guardian, I will continue to independently monitor, review, investigate, research and advocate on behalf of these children to ensure this occurs.

Working collaboratively with service delivery partners across the child protection spectrum will ensure our function as a preventative mechanism will achieve these goals.

I therefore encourage you to value and use the evidence presented in my Child Guardian Report to further your own work in your respective agencies and advance the protection of children and young people across the State.

Copies of the full and summary Report are now available on the Commission's website ([www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au](http://www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au)).