

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

promoting and protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18

Advice to: The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
Topic: Paid Parental Leave Consultations
Date due: 30 September 2009

Thank you for providing the opportunity for the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (the Commission) to provide feedback regarding Australia's Paid Parental Leave (PPL) Scheme. This advice is following the Commissioner's participation in the teleconference organised by FaHCSIA on 17 September 2009.

The Commission's focus is on the safety and wellbeing of all children and young people in Queensland, particularly the most vulnerable. The Commission supports the intention that kinship carers may be recognised for PPL in emergency situations, but would also like to advocate for foster carers to be included in the eligibility criteria for non-parental PPL.

Summary of Commission comments

The Commission:

1. recommends that foster carers be specifically included in the eligibility criteria for non-parent carers, and
2. suggests that it would be good to identify how enhancements to child and maternal health and development will be measured for evaluation purposes.

1. Eligibility of foster carers as non-parent carers

The Commission is of the view that foster carers should be specifically included in the eligibility criteria for non-parental PPL. Foster carers receive state government financial assistance to meet the direct costs of the children they care for. This includes the costs of food, clothing, fares, school requirements and limited recreational activities for the child. These funds are specifically identified as not being a payment or salary to the carer and do not meet any leave or other costs of the carer.

It is acknowledged that currently the majority of foster carers would not meet the work criteria as a high proportion are full time carers. The Commission is of the view, however, that for the foster care system to remain viable across Australia in the medium to longer term there needs to be significant reform in relation to how, and which, people are encouraged to become foster carers. In the future, to sustain a viable out-of-home care system it is quite possible that it may be necessary to pay full salaries to carers to enable and encourage tertiary qualified people to take up caring as a legitimate career choice without having to suffer significant financial penalty.

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In the meantime, people in paid employment need to be encouraged to become foster carers while they retain their employment and one way to do this is to provide them with non-parent PPL when they take on the care of a child.

The Commission is of the view that over time, this would have the dual benefit of not only bringing more, but also more educated, carers into the system. This can only be of benefit to the children in the system who, collectively, achieve significantly lower educational outcomes than other children, this includes Indigenous children.

It is acknowledged that there would need to be distinctions made between those who care for children on an emergency or short term basis, and those who are assuming a longer term care role. There would also need to be consideration given to how many times a carer could access PPL. This proposal is not designed to enable people to care for multiple children and organise it so that they could more or less permanently stay on paid parental leave. This recommendation is aimed at those people who are undertaking a longer term caring function, similar to adoption, such as long term care guardianship role.

2. Evaluation of enhanced child and maternal health and development

The first objective of the PPL scheme is to enhance child and maternal health and development

The Commission is very supportive of this objective, although it is a broad concept and somewhat difficult to assess. Nevertheless, the Commission would strongly encourage that this objective be included in the evaluation and would be interested to hear what measures will be identified for evaluating it.

Please do not hesitate to contact Julie Appleton, Senior Policy Officer, Strategic Policy and Research Program (Ph: 07 3211 6962 or email: Julie.appleton@ccypcg.qld.gov.au) should any aspects of this advice require further clarification.