



Consultation Report for the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry

Results of focus groups with children and young people about their
experiences in out-of-home-care

January 2013

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Executive Summary

In mid-2012, CREATE Foundation was engaged by the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry to consult with children and young people who had lived in out-of-home care through the child protection system about their experiences. CREATE subsequently facilitated four focus groups in Rockhampton, Ipswich, Brisbane and Toowoomba that were attended by 47 children and young people aged between 11 and 24 years. The Commissioner of the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, the Hon Tim Carmody SC, attended the focus groups held in Rockhampton, Ipswich and Toowoomba.

This report summarises the feedback provided by the children and young people who participated in the focus groups. The focus groups were intended to provide children and young people who had lived in out-of-home care through the child protection system with an opportunity to inform the inquiry about their experiences, views and ideas in a supportive and informal setting.

Children and young people who have experienced the child protection system are best placed to inform the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry about the benefits, problems and consequences associated with living in care. The experiences of children and young people within the system that were shared through this consultation process has the potential to provide policy makers with insight into how the statutory instruments, policies, administrative decisions and practice guidelines that underpin the child protection system impact on the lives of the individuals that the system seeks to care for and protect.

Eight major themes have emerged from the feedback provided by participants:

Placements, Stability and Carers. Young people's personal experiences of out-of-home care provide the basis from which they view the child protection system. Unsurprisingly, children and young people's satisfaction with their experience of the child protection system appears to be linked to the nature and stability of out-of-home care placements and the quality of their relationships with their carers. A number of participants in the focus groups highlighted the need for improvements in the areas of carer/worker training and support; placement matching and how placement changes are managed.

Family & Siblings. Connection with birth family was an emotive issue amongst participants. Many young people expressed that they viewed the right to be supported maintain connections with their birth family as a basic need linked closely to feelings of identity. Some children and young people clearly said that they did not want to have contact with their birth family and that they felt the child protection system should respect, and take into account, their views in making decisions about parental and family contact. Participants saw the Department of Communities (the Department) as a critical player in supporting children and young people to consider, and exercise, their rights in relation to maintaining contact with their birth family. Many participants were of the view that there is significant scope for the child protection system to be improved to better provide this support.

Child Safety Officers & "The Department". Children and young people were asked to discuss their relationships with, and perceptions of, their Child Safety Officers and the Department. Participants were divided in their views on this topic. with a significant group of children and young people reported positive experiences in their interactions with Child Safety Officers and saw them as helpful adults who listened; provided material and emotional support; and ensured safety and stability. Another significant group reported negative experiences and felt neglected, ignored and shut out of key processes that affected their lives.

Education. Focus group participants highlighted a number of factors that impacted on their experiences of education including stigma associated with being in statutory care, involvement in planning and the stability experienced whilst in care. The children and young people who participated in the focus groups expressed that

they required more flexible and appropriate support to access education that appropriately responded to their individual needs and changes in circumstances.

Community Visitors & Other Services. Whilst participants reported both positive and negative experiences of individual Community Visitors, on the whole participants valued the independent role that these officers play in the child protection system. The children and young people who participated in the focus groups were generally of the view that Community Visitors and non-government agencies provide a range of services that, in conjunction with Departmental services, contribute to a supportive network of services.

Culture. In discussing the impact of the child protection system on culture, participants generally emphasised the need for individualised care and responses that enabled them to exercise personal choices about the social and cultural activities that they were involved in. Participants reported valuing connections with their community in maintaining cultural identity.

Transition from Care. Participants reported that they felt that being supported to transition from care to adult life was an important aspect of the child protection system. Participants were generally of the view that insufficient time and resources are currently devoted to assisting young people to prepare and implement transition plans. The children and young people who participated in the focus groups also felt that greater post-care support should be provided to ensure that young adults continue to have access to prioritised health, education, housing and employment services.

Participation – having the chance to be heard & involved. The children and young people who participated in the focus groups expressed the view that the child protection system needs to provide a greater level of support to children and young people to enable them to exercise their right to make choices and participate in decisions that affect their lives. Participation was a major theme within the focus groups. Children and young people reported that they are often not consulted or informed about major decisions, such as placement and changes. The children and young people who participated in the focus groups shared many personal stories about the positive and challenging aspects of their experiences within the child protection system. No two children or young people share identical childhood experiences. Each person is unique and has individual goals, interests and support needs. The Queensland child protection system must have the capacity and flexibility to respond to the individual needs of children and young people by providing a safe, stable, supportive and nurturing environment in which they can grow and develop to reach their potential.

1 Introduction

1.1 CREATE Foundation's Purpose

Vision

All children and young people with a care experience have the opportunity to reach their full potential

Mission

Creating a better life for children and young people in care

CREATE does this through:

Connecting children and young people with each other, CREATE and their community.

Empowering children and young people to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and skills that enable them to have a voice and be heard.

Changing the care system, in consultation with children and young people, through advocacy to improve policies, practices and services, and increase community awareness.

Core principles

- Participation is the cornerstone of best practice
- Openness and transparency
- Children and young people are valued, respected and care for
- Staff are valued and supported to excel
- Strong independent advocacy, is informed by children and young people
- Partnerships with governments, organisations and individuals are pivotal to success
- Innovation, creativity and fun

Objectives

CREATE Foundation objectives are to ensure that all children and young people in care are respected, listened to and active participants in decisions which affect their lives. We aim to provide all children and young people in care with opportunities to create better life outcomes and to reach their full potential.

We work to effect system changes for the benefit of all children and young people in care into the future by building community capacity with key stakeholders.

1.2 Queensland Child Protection Inquiry 2012

The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry was established on 1 July 2012 to review Queensland's child protection system. The Hon Tim Carmody SC has been appointed as Commissioner and must provide a written report with recommendations to the Premier by 30 April 2013.

The Inquiry has been established by the Queensland Government to review progress of outcomes related to the *Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions* (the Forde Inquiry) and the *Crime and Misconduct Commission Inquiry* to chart a new road map for child protection for the next decade.

The terms of reference ask the Commissioner to make full and careful inquiry in an open independent manner of Queensland's child protection system, including in relation to:

- the implementation of recommendations by the Forde Inquiry and the Crime and Misconduct Commission reports into child abuse
- whether the current use of available resources across the child protection system is adequate and whether resources could be used more efficiently
- the current Queensland government response to children and families in the child protection system
- the transition of children through, and exiting the child protection system
- the effectiveness of monitoring, investigation, oversight and complaint mechanisms and ways to improve the oversight of and public confidence in the child protection system, and
- the adequacy of any government response and action taken by government to allegations of child sexual abuse in youth detention centres.

The Commissioner has been asked to include recommendations in his report on issues including:

- any reforms to ensure that Queensland's child protection system achieves the best possible outcomes to protect children and support families
- strategies to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system, and
- legislative reforms.

The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry identified that hearing the views of children and young people who had experienced life in out-of-home care was important in meeting its objectives. The Commissioner requested that CREATE Foundation assist in facilitating opportunities for the Commissioner to obtain information directly from children and young people with a care experience.

In addition to the focus groups, of which the results are the subject of this report, CREATE Foundation supported some young people to attend formal Commission hearings and informal meetings with the Commissioner. The focus groups provided the Commissioner with an opportunity to hear directly from young people with an experience of the out-of-home care system in an environment that was age appropriate and did not subject them to the formality of providing formal written evidence or appearing in a court setting.

2 Background, Project Aims and Method

2.1 Background

CREATE Foundation has extensive experience in working and consulting with children and young people in care. CREATE has previously undertaken significant consultation processes informing the development of major government policies. CREATE is committed to consulting with children and young people in care in a way that enables them to have their voices heard, empowers them and values their unique, individual experiences.

The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry funded CREATE Foundation to conduct three focus groups in Rockhampton, Ipswich and Toowoomba in order to provide children and young people who were, or had been, in care with an opportunity to inform the Inquiry by sharing their experiences and views.

CREATE is also funded by the Department of Communities to undertake two consultation processes per year on an agreed topic. The Department of Communities agreed that CREATE Foundation could use the funding provided to conduct further consultations with children and young people in care to support the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry. As a result CREATE conducted a further consultation with children and young people in care in Brisbane.

CREATE worked with the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry to determine the questions participants would be asked and to prepare information resources, forms and promotional material.

It was agreed that CREATE would facilitate focus groups comprising of between six and 12 children and young people at an appropriate time. It was determined that the minimum age for participation would be 12 years, and the maximum age 20, recognising the value of feedback from young people who have recently transitioned out of the child protection system.

All children and young people who attended the focus groups were given a \$30 gift voucher to Coles/Myer or another retailer as an acknowledgement of the time they spent sharing their experiences and views.

When and where:

Four focus groups were held on the following days and in the following locations;

- Rockhampton – 20 October 2012
- Ipswich – 29 October 2012
- Brisbane – 2 November 2012
- Toowoomba – 15 November 2012

The Commissioner and members of The Commission of Inquiry attended the Rockhampton, Ipswich and Toowoomba focus groups.

2.2 Focus Groups

CREATE Foundation recruited participants through the organisation's internal clubCREATE database of children and young people in care, as well as through out-of-home-care service providers in Rockhampton, Ipswich, Brisbane and Toowoomba. Children and young people between the ages of 12 -20 years were invited to participate in the consultations by means of a flyer invitation, as well as being provided with an information sheet (Appendix A).

The focus groups were facilitated by two CREATE staff at each location. The Commissioner attended the Rockhampton, Ipswich, and Toowoomba focus groups with another staff member of the Commission of Inquiry. Each participant was advised of the confidentiality provisions of the consultations and was required to complete a permission form prior to their participation.

The focus groups followed this same structure in each location:

- Arrival and commencement of participant survey for those who arrived early
- Introductions of young people, the Commissioner, other members of the Commission of Inquiry, and CREATE staff

- Introductions to CREATE, the Inquiry, purpose of focus group and confidentiality provisions
- Warm up activity
- Development of a Team Charter (ground rules agreed upon by all members of the group to ensure the consultation is a positive experience for participants and they feel safe in sharing their experiences)
- Discussion with the Commissioner and young people about the Queensland child protection system (see Appendix B for discussion questions)
- Meal break
- Completion of participant survey (Appendix C)
- Debrief and provision of gift vouchers for participation in the focus group

Whilst the four focus groups were designed to follow the same structure identified above, due the varying ages and experiences of the participants who attended the respective focus groups, there were variations in the lengths and depths of discussions had by each of the groups about the questions posed by CREATE.

2.3 Participants

A total of 47 children and young people participated in the consultations across the four locations. There were 19 male (40.4%) and 28 female (59.6%) participants. Department of Communities data from 30 June 2012, states the care population in Queensland is comprised of 51.1% male and 48.9% female.

Ages	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Number	1	2	3	7	10	7	3	2	3	1	3	2	1	2

Table 1. Number of participants in each age group who participated in focus groups

Of the 47 participants, 20 young people were in the 15 – 17 year age bracket (42.6%), which is the age group that the Department of Communities (Child Safety Services) has a legislative obligation to engage in transition from care planning to ensure they are prepared to leave the out-of-home care system at age 18. The *Child Protection Australia 2010-11 Report* recorded that in Queensland at 30 June 2011, 1394 (16.5%) of young people in out-of-home care were aged 15 – 17 years (AIHW, 2012).

The average age of focus group participants was 15 -16 years. Fourteen young people were over the age of 18 and had exited the statutory child protection system.

Eight participants identified as Aboriginal (17%), which is an underrepresentation of the actual number of Indigenous children and young people in care in Queensland, reported as 37.8% by Child Safety as of 30 June 2012.

Participants reported that the time that they had spent in care ranged from six months to 18 years. Four participants were unable to identify how long they had been in care. (Figure 1)

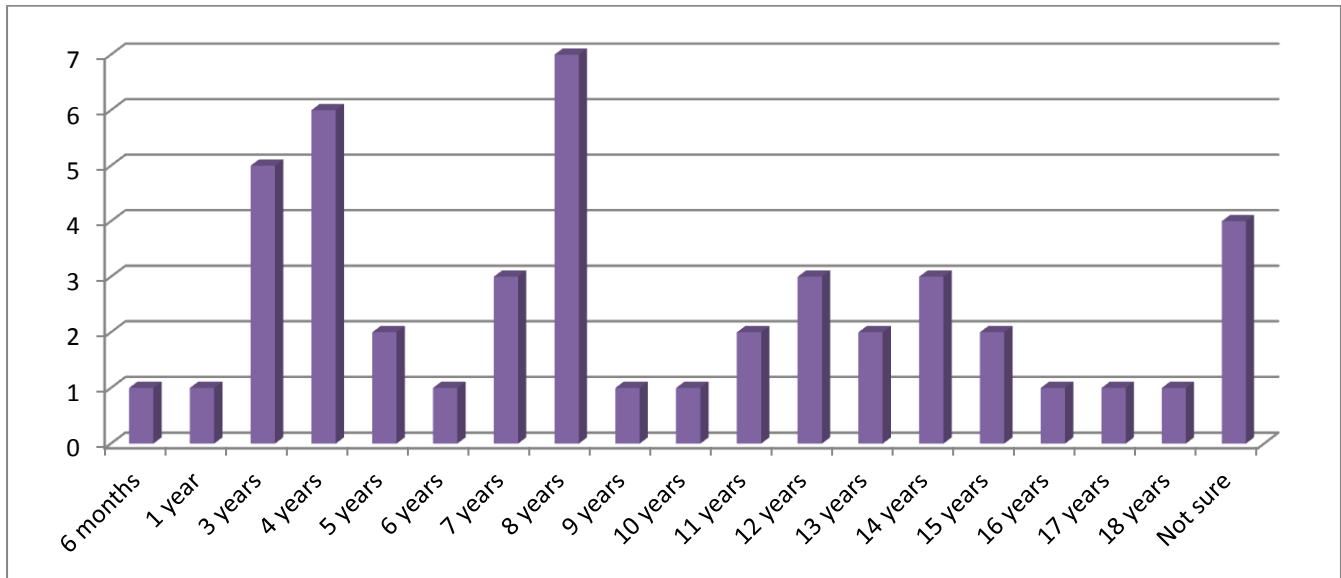


Figure 1. Participants reported length of time in out-of-home care.

Table 2 provides information about where participants reported they were living at the time of the focus groups. Two young people reported that they were ‘couch surfing’. Couch surfing refers to a form of homelessness where a person temporarily lives with family or friends rather than sleeping rough or living in boarding houses (Scuttella, Johnson, Moschion, Tseng & Wooden (2012).

Foster Care	Kinship Care	Residential Care	Independent Living	Other
14 (29.7%)	1 (2%)	15 (31.9%)	11 (23.5%)	5 not specified (10.6%) 2 couch surfing (4.4%) 1 reunified with family (2%)

Table 2. Living arrangements for participants

The majority of participants were in residential care placements (31.9%), which may be correlated to the 15-16 year average age group of those respondents. Young people living in residential care were therefore overrepresented as participants in the focus groups when compared to the prevalence of residential care within the general population of children and young people living in ou-of-home care through the child protection system. The 2010-2011 Child Protection Report (AIHW, 2012) reported that 50.8% of children and young people living in out-of-home care through the Queensland child protection system lived in foster care, 28.2% in kinship care and 6.8% in residential care placements.

3 Information shared by focus group participants about their experiences and perceptions of life in care

The comments and feedback of the participants across the four focus group locations have been collated and presented in this report under eight key themes:

- Placements, Stability & Carers
- Family & Siblings
- Child Safety Officers & “The Department”
- Education
- Community Visitors & other Services
- Culture
- Transition from Care
- Participation – having the chance to be heard & involved

The questions were presented to children and young people in two formats: 1) semi-structured interview questions intended to promote group discussion (Appendix B), and 2) a written survey (Appendix C). The answers provided through both the survey and discussion elements of the focus groups have been compiled together under the eight themes.

The group discussion questions were sometimes presented to focus group participants in a different order, depending on the circumstance. For example, when the Commissioner attended and expressed an interest in a specific topic (for example, transition from care), that question was posed closer to the beginning of the session to ensure that it was discussed in depth. For some of the consultations, the young people themselves led the conversation and the facilitators used the questions only as a guide to ensure that all topic areas were covered by the end of the consultation.

To ensure that this report provides a true and accurate representation of the participants’ views and perceptions of the child protection system CREATE has, to the extent possible, recorded and reported direct quotes.

3.1 Placements, Stability & Carers

Some of the children and young people who participated in the focus groups revealed some very positive experiences about the quality of their placements and their experiences in care. Participants who stated they had positive experiences in foster care generally reported that they had a strong bond with their foster family and felt that they had become a member of that family. Examples of statements participants made about positive foster care experiences included:

“Carers become your family.”

“We get treated the same as regular kids.”

“Some carers treat the kids like their actual family. They should get to keep those kids.”

“I am glad for having a foster family; they are my family now.”

“I had 3 meals a day, went to school and had access to healthcare – what more could I ask for?”

"When I first came into care I was nervous and I got to be in a good place with good carers and a happy environment. I had the best foster carers ever; they help me whenever I need. When I first moved in I was angry and self-harming and they kept giving me hugs."

"It's been good. I've only had the one foster carer and she's my mum."

"I am in a nice home with a nice family."

Participants also reported negative experiences about their time in foster care. Specific comments included:

"They used to beat me and treat me like a dog. My CSO only removed me from the house because I attempted suicide."

"I felt like an outsider."

"Felt like they were in it just for the money."

"Mine [foster carer] was mean. She called me fat."

"Foster carer was good, but they couldn't handle me, so I had to move on to lots of other places."

"They should check out foster carers 'cause they put on an act in front of the Department and are really mean to the foster kids."

"You're treated differently to the carer's birth children."

"It's really hard when you get close and you have to move and then you're not allowed contact."

Residential care was a placement type experienced by over a third of all focus group participants. The feedback provided about living in residential care also varied significantly and seemed to be linked to quality of the child or young person's relationships with others, including residents and staff:

"Staff are annoying at the residential."

"Unprofessional youth workers."

"Put young people who are alike in resi's."

"Some resi workers just don't listen to you."

"I was forced into a resi when I was happy in my foster family."

"In my resi we formed our own family because we didn't have anyone else."

"You're either top dog in a resi or you don't have a chance."

"Police being called to a resi all the time is shit."

"[Residential care] has grown on me. I've been in care such a long time I don't really know any better."

"I got threatened and kicked in the face by other kids. They chuck you in and leave you to defend yourself."

"Workers do a great job sometimes, other times they don't."

"I had a bit more freedom to do what I wanted."

"Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad, then it's too late."

Participants also shared their thoughts and experiences in relation to the stability of the placements they had lived in. There were both encouraging and concerning reports from the children and young people. Participants also demonstrated insight into the importance of placement stability, the reasons placements often break down and how greater placement stability may be achieved:

"When I was put in foster care I was bounced from home to home."

"We move too often and often unnecessarily."

"I think family therapy should be available for the carers and kids so issues can be discussed together and the carers can work through issues they are having to better care for young people. It will help to keep the family together for longer instead of just transitioning the child as soon as an issue arises."

"I feel very lucky because I haven't changed placements. I know children who have changed placements and they are never happy."

"This is my 16th place and I've been in care since I was one-year-old. It's not normal being in care and I deserve to have a real family."

"The Department should put more effort into matching care better for everyone."

"Moving placements affects you developmentally. Because you move around so much it affects your stability to build relationships, it affects your self-worth, you feel like you are being chucked around."

"Need to get some warning [about moving placements]. I woke up at 9am and they told me to pack my stuff and chucked me on the train."

"They dump too many kids with the same carer. The carers get stressed out, the young person gets stressed out and then they act out and get kicked out."

"Shifting foster carers and CSO's make it unstable. It affects schooling, relationships...everything. You're constantly watching your back and never let anyone in your heart."

Focus group participants were not only able to share their personal experiences in out-of-home care – they also highlighted a number of areas where training, support, and more effective systems could benefit foster carers, and residential care workers, and the children and young people they support:

"Families and children should be matched for interests, personality, culture, religion, etc. to prevent unnecessary transitions into multiple homes."

"Carers and workers need in-depth training to deal with issues specifically faced by kids in care, eg. behavioural, intellectual and mental health."

"I think the biggest change that needs to be addressed is the process of everything – approving carers correctly, placements and permissions. Especially how foster carers get approved. Some carers have provided drugs and alcohol to children, have unsuitable home environments or have sexually abused children in their care, and once reported to Child Safety, they've allowed them to continue to be carers and completely disposed of any evidence or reports."

"Foster carers need to respect where we've come from. Don't put our parents down. Foster carers need better training and to be checked on more."

"There should be a two year trial of whether they're good foster carers."

"Foster carers should have to prove what they spend the money on."

"We need to be given more notice of moving – one-week notice of placement changes."

"Have a practice run in a placement to see if it works and if you like it... like a transition period."

3.2 Family & Siblings

When the discussion turned to family and siblings, focus group participants raised contact as a core issue.

"Contact", in child protection, refers to a child or young person in care having meetings with their biological family members, including mother, father, brothers, sisters, and external family members. Contact facilitated by the Department can occur in a variety of settings including Child Safety Service Centres (CSSC), a park, a contact centre, McDonalds, private homes or at the shops. Depending on the circumstance, the contact may be unsupervised or supervised by a Child Safety Officer or other nominated person.

The contact arrangements differ for every child and young person in out-of-home care. Contact decisions are based on the safety and best interests of children and young people, the locations of family members, as well as practical issues such as money, transport, worker availability and the prioritisation of worker time. Focus group participants reported valuing their right to make choices, and be supported, in the amount of contact they have with their families. Specific comments included:

"If parents don't live nearby it's hard to see them and you're not given enough time. If you are somewhere [with your parents] and you overstay, you get reported as a missing person."

"Family contact is really important and not just siblings, mum and dad, but with extended family – aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents. I'm about to have a baby and I got married this year and don't really have a relationship [with family]. It's hard to begin again with family when you've had no contact for 15 years."

"When I was in grade six my mum made me a cake for my birthday and she went to the Department and asked to see me for my birthday. They wouldn't let her see me. I can't get over that they wouldn't let me see my mum for my birthday."

"They've [my siblings] tried to contact me, then Child Safety finds out and they say no."

"I found my dad on facebook, and he just met his granddaughter three days ago."

"I feel like I don't have a family."

"If you're not allowed contact, then it's important to know why."

Contact with siblings was an emotive and critical issue in the consultations:

"You are brought into care because of your parents, not because we did anything wrong. I don't want to be in care. So why does the Department have the right to take away my family contact with the ones who haven't hurt me? My brothers and sisters are there for life. And I feel like I'm not allowed the right to have a real family."

"Brothers and sisters are harder to stay in touch with."

"Try not to separate siblings. I used to have a really close, tight knit relationship with my sister. It was just me and her and we were inseparable. We got closer when my mum died. Our first three placements were short term and we were together. After those three though, we got split up and now we're not as close. We don't even socialise together. But when we do see each other now we fight and I now dislike her."

"I raised my two little brothers, but then when I came into care we got separated. The grief I went through was like experiencing someone had died."

"Being separated put a negative impact on our relationships. If one of us got accepted in a foster family, the others felt unwanted and uncared for."

"Keep siblings at the same school and have visits each week. It gives us experiences together."

"I have five brothers and sisters and the girls went to one place and the boys went to another. I'm close to my sisters, but my brothers – there's no love there."

"If you're separated it becomes a competition to see who gets what in different places."

"Live with siblings – seeing them once a year isn't often, and it's not the same as living with them."

"If there's a resi for kids who don't want to be in a family, then there should be a resi for siblings."

While most of these discussions centred on the lack of contact with family members, it is important to note that some children and young people in out-of-home care expressed that they did not want to have direct contact with some members of their family:

"While you may not want to see your siblings, you should still know what is happening – they are still your family."

"My CSO tried to make me go home and took me there for a visit and then left me there when I didn't want to. No-one told me I was going home. I didn't want to be there so I ran away."

"I'm the only kid out of my siblings who got taken into care. I was given the option of contact and I chose not to. Now that I've left care, I chose to see my sister and we have a great bond."

"If we can't see our family face-to-face then we should still be allowed phone contact or letter writing."

A few of the participants were young parents, and shared their experiences with the child protection system in relation to their own experiences as parents with children in out-of-home care through the child protection system:

"I would try and keep siblings together 'cause both of my kids were together at one stage in the same foster care (placement)."

"Change the fact that I had to prove that I was not like my parents so I could keep my daughter in my care. They assume because I've been abused I'm going to abuse....I had to fight through court. I had to fight through three months of them trying to convince me she'd have a better life in care."

3.3 Child Safety Officers & "The Department"

The survey that was administered as part of the focus groups asked participants to identify three good things about the child protection system/being in care. Many of the participants shared statements of support for their CSO's and what Child Safety has been able to achieve for them. Specific responses included:

"CSO's who can do their jobs."

"They try to improve the child's safety."

"Workers are there when you need them most of the time."

"They have a reasonable understanding of our feelings and point of view."

"Access to food, health care, school and funding like TILA [Transition to Independent Living Allowance]."

"They provide us funds for things. [Some examples given were – a bed, a computer, guinea pigs, Learners Licence, clothes, school]"

"They help you have a stable family."

"You are often safe."

"They sometimes listen to my needs."

"It is the greatest care."

In contrast, there were many discussions in the focus groups about issues with Child Safety Officers, Departmental decision making processes, and resources being available to support children and young people in out-of-home care. Participants shared a number of negative perceptions of the Department based on their experiences:

"The CSO's are very lazy and not reliable."

"Social workers/case workers not listening or not being around enough to offer support and not having enough contact."

"One of our workers told me five times she was coming to visit and didn't show up once out of the five times."

"Normally they say 'no' to everything."

"Don't feel they listen to me."

"Constant changing of CSO's limits the understanding and progress of your situation."

"They always help [only] after things have happened. There's no prevention."

"I feel as if case workers don't take the time to connect with the young person and that they don't have an understanding of the young person."

"My worker always came late to meetings, or not at all. This is quite frustrating 'cause we want to tell her what we want to do."

"I would change their approach to us kids so we don't feel like aliens. It feels like our lives are on hold for them [CSO's]."

"I didn't have contact [with CSO]. I felt like I was put in the 'too hard' basket."

"Some CSO's are good, some are bad, some of them are low lifes, some of them are just interested in the money they can make."

"At my last placement I was telling my CSO about problems and she didn't listen. I asked her for help and she didn't listen."

"CSO's need to get back to me. I'm calling for a reason or for help."

"Caseload too busy – employ more workers on a long-term basis."

The decisions that are made by the Department of Communities (Child Safety Services), as the statutory parents of children and young people in out-of-home care, was another topic that generated significant discussion during the focus groups.

"They take a long time to get permission forms signed."

"Sometimes I feel like the Department treats us like we did something wrong, not our parents."

"Getting approvals and decisions made [is what's wrong with the child protection system]."

"Not enough goal making. They need to be more future focused and have services to make sure that kids exiting care either get a good job or can access further education/training that they want to do and are interested in."

"I can't go over to friends' houses more than once a month because they need to have a blue card and that is inconvenient."

"Even though I have been here for 10 years, my carers have asked for guardianship several times and it doesn't happen. It is just starting now we have a new worker, but we have to write to our biological parents to ask for that to happen, even though they haven't bothered to see me in over 9 years. I don't think they should have a say."

“Sometimes it can take Child Safety so long to sign forms you end up missing out. Carers and workers should be able to sign forms.”

“I was meant to get braces....that was six months ago. The Department is a bit slow with things and disorganised.”

“The way the Department deals with new placements and the ending of placements – we already have attachment issues.”

“Needs to be compulsory that kids get checked up on by CSO’s every month... even if you’re in kinship care. They forget about you when you live in kinship. I had 2 or 3 visits in my whole time in care (6 years).”

“I wish the Department would buy me a car – I’ve been saving for years.”

“They should treat us normal, not like we’re in jail.”

“The Department doesn’t tell you what is happening. They tell you you’re going on holidays or a sleepover when you’re actually going into care.”

“Don’t have so many rules, just like everyone else.”

“The Department doesn’t always take you seriously, especially young people.”

When discussing the issue of resources for children and young people in out-of-home care, there were many comments that cited Child Safety Officer (CSO) and Departmental decision-making and funding processes, as already highlighted above. In addition, participants also offered the following views:

“Not much support is available.”

“Not enough support for kinship carers.”

“We often are not told what services are available for us.”

“There’s no stability in the workforce and they have a high turnover.”

“[the government] needs to stop cutting services that I was using and they were helping me.”

“The government shouldn’t forget about you.”

“Change the thoughts of kids and give them more hope.”

3.4 Education

Inclusive education reflects the values, ethos and culture of a state education system committed to enhancing equitable educational opportunities and improved outcomes for all students, recognising the role education can play in redressing social disadvantage and social injustice. (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 2012). For children and young people in out-of-home care, their education may be more disrupted due to placement changes, suspensions and expulsions from schools.

In the current “Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care Survey” report from the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (September 2012) it is reported that all children on a child protection order granting custody or guardianship to Child Safety Services are entitled to an Education Support Plan (ESP). Education support plans are the responsibility of the Department of Education, Employment and Training (DETE), and should be developed in collaboration with the child or young person and be reviewed at least annually.

Focus group participants perceived both strengths and challenges relating to the Education Support Plan process:

“Not being involved in school/teacher/parent and caseworker meetings – makes you feel like you’re being gossiped and talked about.”

“It should be a necessity for children to go along to case meetings about their Education Support Plans, unless they choose not to.”

“My teachers were all involved in my ESP. This helped because everyone knew what was going on.”

“Telling my teachers [about being in care] should be optional and up to the child or young person, not just a given that everyone should know.”

“I am labeled the foster care kid and treated differently from the outset.”

“I got teased for need special help [laptop, etc]. Sometimes the Department does things wrong by trying to replace family with things you buy with money.”

“My teachers and students in my school treat us normal. They don’t give us a hard time.”

Placement changes also impacted on participant experiences of education services::

“Because of all of my placements I had a very disrupted education which I don’t think was ever taken into consideration that I might need some extra help at school.”

“Changing placements means new schools. School didn’t understand I was at the level [of other students my age]. They assume we’re not up to most of the school standards.”

“Making friends is hard because you change schools so much and you feel isolated because you’re by yourself.”

“If you’re not stable at home, your schoolwork means shit.”

“When you’re in a resi you don’t always have access to a computer, which makes it hard and then you have to spend your lunch time writing assignments or doing homework when you could have done it at home.”

“Sometimes I wanted to go to school, but there was just so much other stuff going on. I didn’t know where I was going to be sleeping.”

“Going to school was the problem – I had zero motivation, but every time I did go I just got into trouble for wearing the wrong uniform.”

“Support from carers or residential is needed to do well in school. You need permission to go to the library, or need to ask them to get the others [living in the residential service] to be quiet. I felt like I was a burden ‘cause I went to school.”

Participants discussed how negative experiences in school affected self-esteem, confidence, and identity and how the perceptions and actions of others impacted upon their education:

“There are so many dropouts of children and young people in care because they think they’re failures.”

“We need more understanding from everyone, kids and staff. Some people have been in care and they should respect that.”

“I got bullied so much for being in care and ended up leaving school. The teachers like to broadcast it [that you’re in care].”

“You try to pretend you’re normal and fit in. People don’t care I’m a foster kid.”

“The school and teachers treat you like you’re dumber than you are when you’re in care.”

“You have to explain to your friends why there’s a government car there to pick you up.”

“Every school I’ve been too I’ve been teased and told I’m not going to turn out any good. I am told my mum doesn’t love me and that it’s all my fault I’m in foster care.”

Education opportunities that vary from mainstream schooling were described by some participants as encouraging opportunities for children and young people who are facing so many conflicting issues with their time in out-of-home care.

“Mainstream education didn’t help me. When I went to a flexi school that worked, I got help with the things I was struggling with.”

“Why doesn’t the Department have a tutor for kids who don’t go to school, one day a week at the Department when kids can go and get tutoring?”

“I’m high needs at school with a disability and I get a teacher’s aide which has helped me with the work. As I missed out on a lot and need to do a lot to catch up.”

“My school is better from all high schools. It’s distance ed, one-on-one. My school counselor got me in there. Bullying is no longer an issue and I work directly with the teacher.”

“I had a time-out card, which meant that if I was having a hard time in class, I could give this card [to the teacher] and go straight to the guidance officer.”

“The way they teach you should be more about the individual instead of the group. More individual-based support.”

3.5 Community Visitors & other Services

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian has delivered the Community Visitor (CV) program since 2004. The purpose of the program is to regularly visit children and young people in out-of-home

care to monitor their safety and well-being and the quality of the services they receive.. The Community Visitors have a role independent from the delivery of services funded or provided by the Department of Communities. The focus of Child Safety Officers is to ensure that the concerns, views and wishes of children and young people are listened to and seriously considered.

The participants of the four focus groups had varying reports on their experiences with Community Visitors. The participants emphasised the value of the independent role of the community visitors and how this made them easier to talk to. :

“They [the Queensland Government] give us CV’s to help us with the Department.”

“It’s bad you have to change [your CV] when you move placements.”

“I felt like my CV harassed me even when I told her I didn’t want contact.”

“I was in care for three years and I saw them once.”

“They’re angels.....they have a lot of sway in how you’re treated. The CV has more power than the CSO.”

“I think they do a good job, they have independence.”

“CV is easier to talk to than carers and others.”

“They will slack off and drift away. They go to the more needy kids first. But it depends on the CV themselves. It’s good they’re independent from the Department.”

Other organisations were identified by the participants as providing them with the support they needed during their time in care. These organisations included Mercy Family Services, Life Without Barriers and CREATE Foundation. While there were only three organisations specified in the feedback recorded, the focus groups were held in four different locations across Queensland where local agencies may have provided some of the other supports that were reported by participants as being beneficial:

“[I’ve had] counselling support from trauma that’s happened in the past.”

“The support networks/organisations you get linked in with [are the good things about the child protection system]”

“The support groups and activities for kids.”

“There are many support services available for young people in care.”

“Mercy is really good because they take the time to get to know you and to help you even more.”

“Life without Barriers workers are amazing.”

3.6 Culture

The cultural backgrounds of children and young people who participated in the focus groups were not proportionate to the representation of cultural identity within the wider child protection system. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people were under represented in the focus groups. Eight of the

children and young people who participated in the focus groups identified as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and two identified as being from another cultural background. The remaining 36 were from Anglo-Australian cultural backgrounds.

Participants strongly believed that children and young people in care should be supported to develop and maintain connections with their community and to maintain their cultural identity. Specific statements from participants included:

“Families and children should be matched for interests, personality, culture, religion etc to prevent unnecessary transitions into multiple homes.

“You grow up not knowing where you came from or where you belong”

“If the child or young person has a religion or cultural background then try to place them in a family that has the same beliefs or cultural background”

One young person had a suggestion for increasing the involvement of Aboriginal communities in the lives of children in care, even if the children and young people are not within the realms of their own mob:

“Maybe if the Department asked our communities to help us....ask if they can assist. That could have a big impact.”

Another cultural comment from a young person who identifies as having Aboriginal heritage:

“Change the rules for guardianship. I should be able to decide to stay with the one family. I’m afraid to think the Department could take me away from my carer who I call my “mum”, because she is not Aboriginal.”

In addition to discussions of culture and heritage, the participants brought up the culture of being a “kid in care”. Some of these discussions included the following:

Media – stereotypical views of a kid in care is that they are out of control or have something wrong with them.

A feeling of being insecure and not feeling wanted or loved.

Can affect their sensibilities, sense of security, attachment and trust of others and self-esteem.

Feelings of isolation.

Your friends are really your friends ‘cause they don’t know you’re in care and you’re scared of what they will say. There’s such isolation to being in care. Particularly for me because of my cultural background.

3.7 Transition from care to independence

Transition from care refers to the process through which a young person in care leaves the child protection

system and becomes an adult. It is recommended that this process commences at 15 years of age. Supporting a person to transition from care involves helping them to set goals for their future and to prepare and implement a transition plan in conjunction with key stakeholders in their lives. The provision of support and services to young adults after they have left care is also an integral part of the transition from care process. The value of supporting young people to prepare for adult life has become a significant policy issue in Queensland and nationally over the past four years. This is highlighted by the inclusion of transition from care within the National Standards for Out-Of-Home Care and the launch of the Queensland-based "Transition to Independence Month."

Of the focus group participants, 72% were over the age of 15 years and were either in the process of transitioning from care or had already transitioned. Their feedback about this process varies, and highlights the need to better support young people in the areas of planning, funding, skill development and post-care services.

In relation to transition from care planning (TFC), the young people shared the following:

"They don't start preparing you for transitioning out of care soon enough. I think at the age of 15 it should start."

"The timing is shocking. I didn't know until I was 17 I had to plan."

"The planning..... it's really wishy-washy." It's not very well structured." The meetings go over your head. It makes it impossible to plan."

"Workshops around goal setting is really important."

"Young people who are transitioning need to have regular catch ups with support people."

"Timeframes are too short."

"TFC felt like a piece of paperwork, not individualised."

"I'm 16 and starting to freak out. No-one's spoken to me about it."

Knowledge of the funding available for young people transitioning from care is another key area of discussion:

"The benefits such as youth allowance and stuff which helps provide for things such as a care, clothes, flights to see family."

"CSO's need to be a lot more informative. All I know is I had a bit of money. My CSO didn't tell me I had YARS funding available. It felt like I was in the dark."

"More funding for young people for TFC. I couldn't use funding for things I really needed funding for. I needed more than just a bed."

"Resi needs to have compulsory savings and it helps you buy things for when you leave."

"I honestly think this is the department's strong point. They've given me white goods, stuff for my kitchen when I move out and an income."

"You have to get three quotes on what money is to be spent on. By the time Child Safety makes a decision, the quote is expired."

Young people shared insights into the practical skills they need to develop in preparation for transitioning to independence, and the challenges that can occur if there is a deficit in these skills:

“Budgeting skills are important.”

“Compulsory life skills workshop – budgeting, relationships. Young people may be disinterested at the time, but the skills will be useful for in the future.”

“I need more education to know what I’m going to do. There’s one job I’d really love to do – I want to study makeup at TAFE.”

“Practical help. SILS (Supported independent living) is about independent living, job courses, TAFE, school. You need to do it quickly, before you’re 18. But I like to take everything slow and easy.”

“More workers to help you out with Centrelink, food shopping, etc. To be there with you.”

“Nobody taught me how to buy tampons and one day I didn’t have any.”

Formal support from Child Safety ceases when a young person’s child protection order expires at the age of 18. A support service case may be opened by Child Safety to complete any of the outstanding tasks within the young person’s transition plan. The participants raised the identified the following issues about their needs for ongoing support past 18:

“Make sure we have all of our therapeutic needs met. They should have made sure things were in place when I left care to still manage my mental health.”

“Need support up to 21 (financial, emotional, counselling). Make sure all after-care needs are met.”

“Placements being flexible upon the young person turning 18.”

“In mainstream society, kids get to stay with their families post 18. This isn’t available to children and young people in care.”

“Should still have someone there to access after you transition. As it is, you often have no-one to go to or turn to.”

“CV’s should continue past 18.”

“Transitioning can be scary, but it is better that I don’t have to ask Child Safety for things.”

3.8 Participation – having the chance to be heard & involved

The participation of children and young people in out-of-home care in decision making and planning development that has an impact on their lives is a fundamental right specified within the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) . There is a need for children and young people to understand the reason behind departmental decisions, as well as for them to be able to discuss these decisions with their workers.

Through all of the themes identified in this report, a core element has been the views and wishes of children and young people being heard. Be it a CSO, family member, teacher, sibling, carer or Community Visitor, the participants all highlighted the need to have a say and feel like someone was listening to them.

Some examples of the participant's views on having a chance to be heard and involved are:

"They say they know what's best for me, but don't ask me."

"CSO's are sometimes helpful and are easy to talk to."

"Talk to the youth workers at resi's."

"Get to make some choices for yourself."

"Don't have freedom. Sometimes we don't get to do stuff we want to do."

"Children are not being heard and taken seriously."

"Feeling different from everyone else because of all of the meetings with the lady that comes once a month."

"The guidance counsellor was a good key contact and good to have regular contact with. She'd meet me once a week for a catch up and was the person who would talk to all my teachers."

"Make sure we get to say goodbye to people in a house if we want to."

"I just ignore the Department if I don't get permission."

"When you wanted to know [your family history] you had to ask, and when you did, it took a while to get the information."

"More knowledge of our rights and how workers should work better with us – they need more training."

"Young people should start to have a say at 8 years old."

"Young people need to be more involved. They have all these meetings about me, but I never got told or invited. I know me better than they know me."

"I was explained my rights and I knew what was happening."

The power of information provision to children and young people in out-of-home care is evident in these statements.

4 Conclusion

Ensuring that children and young people's views are heard and considered within decisions that affect their lives is a central aspect of the Queensland child protection system (*Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld), s5D(1)(b)). The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry has implemented this principle by providing children and young people with the opportunity to share their experiences, views and recommendations in a variety of ways. Participation in the focus groups that are the subject of this report enabled children and young people with a

way to participate in the Inquiry that was age appropriate and did not involve the formality of giving evidence through a formal submission or appearing in a court setting.

The information provided by children and young people through the focus groups indicates that each person faces unique circumstances, opportunities and challenges. Many young people reported that they had experienced both positive and negative aspects of life in care.

Despite the variance in the experiences reported, it is clear that the participants in the focus groups felt that the Queensland child protection system needed to be able to identify and respond to the unique, individual, needs of each person. The feedback provided by participants was often critical where people felt that their individual needs had not been prioritised or considered. Many participants expressed frustration about departmental processes and timelines that restricted opportunities that may have led to social, cultural, educational, health or financial benefits.

Participants also talked about the rights of children and young people in care to make, or be actively involved in, the decisions that affect them. Many young people shared stories of situations in which they were not consulted about a key decision and the negative effects this had on them. The children and young people who participated in the focus groups were uniformly clear that they want support from the child protection system to exercise their rights to make choices and participate in decision making.

The children and young people who participated in the focus groups were vocal about the need for the child protection system to offer greater placement stability. Participants identified the importance of having a stable placement with competent and supportive carers. Many young people shared stories about the significant impact that multiple placement changes had on their lives and well-being. Significantly, many participants discussed the impact of multiple placement changes on their education, friendships and ability to develop and maintain social connections. Participants also emphasised the importance of having consistent and ongoing relationships with key workers such as Child Safety Officers and Community Visitors. There was a significant view expressed by participants that the existing child protection system does not adequately match children and young people with appropriate placement options. However, those young people who had experienced a stable placement history within the care system were generally positive about the quality of the child protection system and the care that they had received.

Focus group participants were also passionate about contact with their birth family. Participants generally felt that they should be supported to exercise personal choices about the amount of contact they had with their families. Children and young people also strongly expressed views about the impact of separating siblings into different out-of-home care placements. The impact of separating siblings was reported to be exacerbated where support had not been provided to ensure that regular contact occurred.

The importance of being supported to plan and make transitions from the child protection system to adult life also emerged as a significant topic of discussion amongst participants. A significant proportion of participants were of the view that the child protection system needs to provide greater assistance to young people to plan, and make, the transition from care to adult life. This included requests for greater post care support to ensure consistency in pre and post care therapeutic, education, housing and employment services.

The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry is charged with developing recommendations to build a robust and efficient service system that delivers the best possible outcomes for children and young people who require care and protection. By hearing the views of those who have experienced life in care, it is anticipated that the Inquiry will have greater insight into the lived experiences of children and young people who will be impacted by the Inquiry's recommendations.

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6 Appendices

APPENDIX A



Creating a better life for children and young people in care

QUEENSLAND CHILD PROTECTION COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

CONSULTATION GROUPS INFORMATION SHEET

About the CREATE Foundation

CREATE Foundation is the national peak body representing children and young people in out-of-home care and exists to improve the opportunities for children and young people in care across Australia. Our mission is, "Creating a better life for children and young people in care", and CREATE runs services and programs to:

- **Connect** children and young people to each other, CREATE and their community;
- **Empower** children and young people to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and skills that enable them to have a voice and be heard; and
- **Change** the care system, in consultation with children and young people, through advocacy to improve policies, practices and services, and increase community awareness.

All programs developed and delivered by CREATE involve the participation of young people in the concept, design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of programs.

What is the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry?

The Queensland Government has started an inquiry into the child protection system. This means that a team of people, led by Mr Tim Carmody (the Commissioner), will work together for the next 6 months to look at what it's like for a child or young person coming into care, what happens when someone is in care and how young people transition from care. Mr Carmody will then make recommendations to the Government about how child protection services could be improved.

It is important to have your voice heard by the Inquiry

Mr Carmody and his team are talking to a lot of people who are involved in Queensland's child protection system. Mr Carmody is particularly interested in hearing from you - somebody who is currently living in out-of-home care, or has been in care. Mr Carmody and his team want to hear about your experiences, the parts of the system that you think are working well, what's not working well and what you think could be done to make the system better for children and young people.

Mr Carmody wants to sit down with young people in Ipswich, Rockhampton and Toowoomba. CREATE Foundation will assist Mr Carmody to ask young people questions that will help him to better understand what it is like to be in contact with the child protection system. This process is called a 'consultation'. CREATE aims to run three consultations with young people aged between 12 and 20 years who are living, or have previously lived, in out-of-home care (i.e. foster care, kinship care or residential care).

Participating in the consultations is your chance to have a say about how child protection services in Queensland could be improved. However, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer and you can stop participating in the group at any time.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Participating in this consultation session will give you an opportunity to talk to Mr Carmody and / or his colleagues about your experiences in care. The information you share in this group will be treated as confidential by CREATE and the Commission of Inquiry. At the start of each focus group CREATE will ask all those present to agree to keep the details provided by others private.

The information you provide may be used by Mr Carmody in his report about the child protection system. This report will be made public however you will not be identified within it. There is no guarantee what you say will be used in the report but it will be useful information for Mr Carmody to hear.

Young people who participate in the consultations could provide information that makes CREATE Foundation or the Commission of Inquiry concerned for their safety or well-being. If this happens CREATE and the Commission of Inquiry may need to refer these concerns to an appropriate authority such as the Queensland Police Service or the Department of Communities to make sure you are kept safe.

Other ways to provide information to the Commission of Inquiry

If you or someone you know wants to provide more information to the Commission you can do this in a couple of ways.

The first is through a submission. Anyone, including children and young people, can make a submission to the Commission. Submissions do not have to use formal language. The most secure way to make a submission is by using the secure online form found on the Commission's website. You can also email a submission to: submissions@childprotectioninquiry.qld.gov.au. Please make it clear in your submission if you would like the information in your submission kept private. The information will not be publicly released if you do not want it to be. All other submissions may be published on the Commission website.

Some young people may wish to appear before the inquiry in person to give evidence or tell their story. This can be a very a daunting experience for young people and they need to be appropriately supported. There is no guarantee that everyone who wants to speak at the inquiry will be given the chance to do so. Public hearings commenced on Monday 13 August 2012.

If you are interested in providing information to the Commission in the form of a submission or at a hearing and want some advice or help, please call the Commission on 1300 505 903 or CREATE Foundation on (07) 3317 6020 (ask to speak to Lucas, Kelly or Che).

Contact

If you want any more information about the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry please visit the Commission website <https://www.childprotectioninquiry.qld.gov.au>. Inquiries to the Queensland Child Protection Commission can be made to:

Phone: 1300 505 903
Email: info@childprotectioninquiry.qld.gov.au
Post: Queensland Child Protection
Commission of Inquiry
PO Box 12196
George St QLD 4003

APPENDIX B

Questions for young people's focus groups

MAGIC WAND

1. If you had a magic wand, what would you change about the child protection system?

- 2. Carers, residential care, Child Safety Officers and Community Visitors**
 - a) What has been your experience with foster carers?

 - b) What has been your experience with residential care?

 - c) What has been your experience with Child Safety Officers?

 - d) What has been your experience with Community Visitors?

- 3. Stability**
 - a) Are there things you think could be done to make changes in placements easier for young people to deal with?

- 4. Education**
 - a) Tell us what school is like for a young person in care. What could be done better?

- 5. Family and siblings**
 - a) Do you think that enough is done to keep young people in touch with their birth family and siblings?
What could be done better?

- 6. Transition From Care**
 - a) What is required for a successful transition from care?

APPENDIX C

This is an anonymous survey to be completed individually. Your responses may be used to inform the processes of the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry and may appear in a report from the Inquiry, with the responses of other children and young people with an out-of-home care experience. Your name and personal details will not be revealed in any documents.

Survey about child protection in Queensland

- 1. How old are you? _____

- 2. Are you: Male Female

- 3. Which cultural group do you identify with?
 - a) Aboriginal
 - b) Torres Strait Islander
 - c) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
 - d) Anglo-Australian
 - e) Other: _____

- 4. How many years have you been or were you in care? _____

- 5. Are you currently living in
 - a) Foster care
 - b) Kinship care
 - c) Resi care
 - d) Independent living
 - e) Other (please give details)

- 6. Can you list three things you think are good about the child protection system/being in care?
 - 1)
 -
 -
 - 2)
 -
 -

3)
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7. What do you think are the three biggest problems with the child protection system/being in care?

1)
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2)
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3)
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8. Is there anything else that is important to you to share with the QLD Child Protection Commission of Inquiry?

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Thank you for filling this out

