

Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry

Save the Children Australia

October 2012

About Save the Children

1. Save the Children is the world's leading independent international organisation for children. The organisation works in more than 120 countries towards a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation. Our work focuses on the areas of: child protection; education; health; emergency response; disaster risk reduction; and climate change adaptation. It aims to deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children in Australia and overseas.
2. The first Save the Children Australia branch was established in Queensland in 1919. The Queensland Office today works extensively with children and families in more than 48 communities in early childhood care and development, multicultural learning, school attendance and parenting support and has the largest NGO emergency response team. Our primary focus in Queensland is on disadvantaged and isolated communities and community-based projects to improve education and protection outcomes.
3. Save the Children's Intensive Supported Playscheme in Queensland aims to increase the safety, health and wellbeing of children aged 0 to 5 years by engaging families in their early development through organised play. One of the main benefits of Playscheme is the development of children's readiness for school, which in turn helps increase their long-term engagement with education and life-long employment prospects.
4. Children starting their first year of school often feel overwhelmed by an unfamiliar environment, new peers, different routines and a teacher whom they might not know. During Playscheme sessions, qualified Save the Children staff provide parents with advice, skills and links to other community services to help their children prepare for school. School readiness activities, such as story times, group games, phonetics, and art and crafts aim to make transition to school easier by developing children's concentration, literacy and numeracy abilities, listening skills, self-control and social skills.
5. In the South East, our Intensive Supported Playschemes deliver programs in 31 locations each week covering a region from Deception Bay to Murwillumbah. These locations also include correctional facilities, caravan parks and schools. Our Domestic and Family Violence Accommodation and Support Services (known as Jebb and Gareema) employ specialist Children's Support Workers to help children and young people make sense of the impact of violence in their lives. We also run early intervention child abuse prevention programs, known as the Future Parents Programs in the Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast and across Brisbane for young people.

Submission background

6. The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry was established on 1 July 2012. 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.
7. 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 and the Crime and Misconduct Commission Inquiry to chart a new road map for child protection for the next decade.
8. 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.
9. 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.

Save the Children's commitment to Child Protection

10. Save the Children Australia is committed to protecting children, regardless of gender, race, country of origin or religious belief. The organisation's work is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which states that children should be protected from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury, abuse, neglect, maltreatment and exploitation, including sexual abuse.

11. Save the Children's commitment to child protection is based on the following principles:
- Promoting and protecting the best interests of children at all times.
 - Zero tolerance of child abuse – mandatory reporting of confirmed or suspected child abuse.
 - Child protection as a shared responsibility between the organisation, its partners and the communities in which it works.
12. The views of children and young people are used to inform child protection policy and program development. Save the Children has detailed Child Protection Guidelines to protect children from abuse or exploitation, promote the rights of children and work with children to ensure their best interests are promoted. They also aim to protect staff and associates by setting clear boundaries for their work with children and communities.
13. The purpose of the Guidelines is to embed child protection in the daily operations of Save the Children and ensure best practice in child protection. The Guidelines aim to:
- Establish a proactive culture of child protection.
 - Maintain a child safe and child friendly environment.
 - Clarify roles and responsibilities to meet these standards in all Save the Children programs and activities through the use of a user-friendly document.

Save the Children's response to specific questions raised by the Inquiry

Reviewing the progress of implementation of the recommendations of the Crime and Misconduct Commission Inquiry

14. Save the Children has extensively consulted with its program staff to identify areas of improvement for children in the foster care system. The response to this specific question has been formed on the basis of working with children and their families in frontline service delivery.
15. Save the Children's specialised program staff identified that in some cases foster carers lack basic skills, knowledge and experience to care for the children who have been placed under their guardianship. In some circumstances, this can lead to multiple placements with foster carers. The results of multiple placements can result in a lack of educational opportunities due to missed schooling, a lack of access to vocational pathways, the absence of consistent role models and mentors and issues with attachment and relationships. Children in these circumstances are also at high risk to behavioural issues and other anti-social behaviour.

16. It is also a worrying trend that children who are at risk and vulnerable can often be blamed for the movement between foster families. A reduction in multiple placements for children requires an increase in resources and support for foster carers. It is also important that foster carers feel valued and are provided with ongoing support to ensure that children receive consistent and quality care.
17. In our experience, there is currently inadequate support for voluntary care providers in regards to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship within the child protection system. This would be assisted by further consideration of long term strategies for children with safety and cultural appropriateness being at the forefront of decision making.
18. The Aboriginal Placement Principle is not always successful in achieving what is in the best interest of the child. This occurs for a range of reasons including the cultural appropriateness of the placement, the lack of connection to the child's community, the community's capacity to manage the level of support required, the Department of Communities, Child Safety & Disability Services capacity to identify and provide the appropriate level of support to meet the needs of each child.

Recommendations

- Save the Children recommends that the process for the selection and screening of foster carers be consistent and more rigorous to ensure the most appropriate, safe and suitably experienced and skilled people become foster carers.
- Save the Children recommends that the Department of Communities, Child Safety & Disability Services adequately resource the selection process, require minimum standards for foster carers and provide ongoing training and support to foster carers in areas such as understanding the impact of trauma and abuse in children and increasing capacity to respond to children's needs. This would reduce the risk of children being placed a number of times and experiencing emotionally negative outcomes as a result of these multiple placements.
- Save the Children recommends that there be a separate inquiry into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship and the child protection system.

The current use of available resources across the child protection system is adequate and whether resources could be used more efficiently

19. There is substantial evidence that investing in early intervention programs leads to improved outcomes for children and young people. Intervention includes identifying vulnerabilities of children and young people and providing a service that meets the needs at an early stage of life.

20. Save the Children has identified a gap in the child protection system to protect children from harm occurring. Currently, Child Safety Officers do not always respond to a risk of harm and therefore do not intervene prior to an incident of harm or abuse. At times minor incidents will lead to ongoing harm and abuse of children at which time it is too late to prevent children from abuse.
21. Save the Children has identified the value in working in homes to provide support and guidance to families before there has been a notified concern. There is a need for the Department of Communities, Child Safety & Disability Services to direct more of a focus on recognising protective factors. Parents should also be encouraged and not penalised for seeking support and assistance.

Recommendations

- Save the Children recommends the need to direct funding and resources into the early intervention and preventative child protection measures and services
- Save the Children recommends more community wide education in areas such as the impacts of domestic violence, child protection and child rights.
- Save the Children recommends increased funding for existing effective programs that meet needs of key groups such as young parents and teach children their rights.
- Save the Children recommends that the Department of Communities, Child Safety & Disability Services provide increased community awareness and media campaigns regarding impacts of abuse and DFV on children and resource school programs that ensure children are unaware of their rights and self-protective strategies.

The current Queensland government response to children and families in the child protection system including the appropriateness of the level of, and support for, front line staffing

22. Currently, insufficient housing opportunities have led to homelessness for some young people and their families. There are also families and young people couch surfing and living in overcrowded and inadequate accommodation.
23. In some circumstances, women and their children are potentially left homeless if they leave the family home after domestic violence, with the perpetrator remaining in the home. The recent changes to Domestic and Family Violence legislation in Queensland expand the definition of Domestic and Family Violence and child abuse, and emphasise protection from harm for children living with family violence. Save the Children hopes that this legislation will produce changes in practice in ouster orders and women and children's homelessness.
24. Save the Children has seen examples of highly transient families falling through the system. This is a child protection risk that requires a whole of government response and intervention. It is important for the Department of Communities, Child Safety & Disability Services to acknowledge the specific needs of children at risk staying in refuge such as change of living situation and schools.

25. The Government must provide more support and services to women experiencing violence in the home to prevent children needing to enter the child protection system.
26. It is our observation, that there exists an inconsistent decision making process in regards to the removal and reunification of children from and with their families. It is Save the Children's experience that reunification efforts for some families are supported where there are still outstanding concerns, whilst in other situations where there are minimal/no concerns families have no reunification options available.
27. There is also a lack of participation by a child or young person in the reunification process. Children and young people need a greater say in regards to their own lives.

Recommendations

- Save the Children recommends the Ouster order be strengthened to remove the perpetrator of domestic violence, instead of housing the person whose experienced violence and the children in refuge.
- Save the Children recommends that the Department of Communities, Child Safety & Disability Services identify ways that the child's voice can be heard more clearly in the reunification process.

Other issues identified by Save the Children:

- Parents not adequately attending to children's health needs because they are afraid of the system and that the child will be taken into care.
- Waiting lists for NGO counselling and mental health services are too long – current defunding / reduced funding further complicates this.
- In some circumstances, Inexperienced Child Support Officers advising staff that they are not being adequately supported within the Department of Communities, Child Safety & Disability Services and are often overwhelmed by the role resulting in high turnover.
- At times the Child Support Officer has misinterpreted the presence of messiness as child protection issues and there have been circumstances where a lack of cultural awareness has led to conclusions that are not always warranted. Further education and professional development on these issues is recommended.

Reviewing the effectiveness of the monitoring, investigation, oversight and complaint mechanisms for the child protection system and identification of ways to improve oversight of and public confidence in the child protection system

28. In regards to the Department of Communities, Child Safety & Disability Services, Save the Children has identified the Department's relationship with the community as critical in terms of improving confidence by the public in the child protection system.