

NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT

Growing Them Strong, Together

Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee

Report 2

Executive Summary

The Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee (CPEMRC) was appointed by the Minister for Child Protection, the Hon Kon Vatskalis MLA, to undertake an independent monitoring role in regard to the implementation of the reforms agreed to by the Northern Territory Government following the release of the *Growing them Strong, Together* report of the Board of Inquiry (BOI) in October 2010. The Committee reports to the Northern Territory Parliament through the Minister for Child Protection twice a year on the progress of implementation of the reforms. This is the Committee's second report. The first report was tabled in the NT Legislative Assembly in August 2011.

The CPEMRC has since met on three occasions to consider DCF progress, undertake site visits and seek feedback from key stakeholders through structured consultation¹. These consultations provided an invaluable opportunity for community engagement and in ensuring the implementation of BOI recommendations can be effectively executed. The Chair and the Chief Executive of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) also attended hearings of the Council of Territory Cooperation on several occasions.

During this period, the CPEMRC was also asked to consider the NT Ombudsman's Report 'A Life Long Shadow' which was tabled in NT Parliament on 8 August 2011. The CPEMRC endorsed DCF's planned response and was subsequently been asked by the Minister for Child Protection to monitor the implementation of the Ombudsman's recommendations given the overlap of key directions with the response to the BOI. Additionally the Committee has welcomed the Children's Commissioner as an observer to part of the CPEMRC meetings to ensure the integration of the BOI recommendations with the Commissioner's findings and insights on the overall performance of the child protection system.

This second report highlights the significant progress that has been achieved in implementing the BOI recommendations. As at 1-2 March 2012:

- 12 of 34 urgent recommendations had been implemented
- Implementation of the remaining 22 urgent recommendations was underway
- 13 of the remaining 108 semi-urgent recommendations had been implemented
- Work against the remaining 95 semi-urgent recommendations had commenced
- Work had commenced against the five important, but not urgent recommendations

¹ Minutes, 3rd Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee Meeting, 29-30 August 2011, Katherine; Minutes, 4th Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee Meeting, 1-2 December 2011, Darwin/Palmerston; Minutes, 5th Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee Meeting, 1-2 March 2012, Tennant Creek.



This progress needs to be viewed in the context of key issues noted by the Department and acknowledged in the First Report. Specifically those issues relating to the complexity and wide reaching implications of the reform process and cultural change within the child protection system, information systems and communications, and importantly the healing process that underpins acceptance and community engagement.

Demonstrable progress has been achieved in improving the DCF organisational culture, communication within DCF and between DCF and its stakeholders, staff recruitment and the flow-on effects towards relieving workload pressures, improvements to the alternative care system and the establishment of the Aboriginal peak body.

Each of these areas nevertheless remain a work in progress as capacity is built and developments become embedded in DFC in the face of relentless work pressures.

The development of an information system to support evidence informed practice and to monitor the overall performance of the system through the availability of management information, is progressing. In the meantime DCF has commenced monitoring six key measures which will be reported quarterly to CPEMRC and provide qualitative data on the performance of the system². It is anticipated that CPEMRC's third Report will include trend data and enable a more appropriate overview of performance based on a longer reporting period.

Attention to staff compliance with accurate data entry will need to be maintained, recognising that this is a challenge for busy child protection systems in all jurisdictions where face to face work with families takes precedence over administration.

Of note however in terms of immediate impact and significant achievement, DCF has made good progress in addressing response times to referrals and notifications. This progress has occurred in a context of a substantial increase in the more severe Category 1 and 2 notifications. It is anticipated that workload challenges will remain well into the future. DCF reports that during the period of reform there have been increases in notifications due to heightened public awareness and increased vigilance by notifiers.

In this context, the recruitment and retention of staff will remain as a priority for DCF to fulfil its role and achieve reform. It is not alone in facing this challenge in the Northern Territory. The cost of housing and housing shortages across much of the Territory, particularly regional and remote areas, remains the most obvious impediment to attracting and retaining suitably qualified non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal staff and carers. It is acknowledged that the context of child protection in the NT is different to that in the southern states and is marked by substantially greater social housing need and poorer housing, greater levels of absolute poverty, remoteness and often intergenerational joblessness; a relatively low ratio of adults available to care for children; the effects of dispossession of lands on communities' sense of wellbeing; the loss of traditional culture; the impact of intergenerational violence and alcohol and other chemical substance misuse on the care and wellbeing of children and young people. This context was in stark evidence during the CPEMRC's site visit to Kalkarindji and Tennant Creek³.

² Chief Executive, Department of Children and Families, Report to the 3rd meeting of the Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee, 29-30 August 2011, Katherine; Chief Executive, Department of Children and Families, Report to the 4th meeting of the Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee, 1-2 December 2011, Darwin/Palmerston; Chief Executive, Department of Children and Families, Report to the 5th meeting of the Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee, 1-2 March 2012, Tennant Creek.

³ Minutes, 5th Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee Meeting, 1-2 March 2012, Tennant Creek.



It is critical that a whole of government approach is effectively mobilised to ensure the levers for change that are outside the mandate of DCF are engaged and activated. It is particularly important that the 'up-stream' determinants of child maltreatment be more actively addressed to prevent the child protection system from again becoming overloaded. This requires further investments from the housing, health and education sectors for highly disadvantaged young families to have safe and healthy living environments and opportunities to build family strengths, parenting and health literacy skills to prevent children from becoming at risk for maltreatment in the first place.

We acknowledge that history cannot be changed but sensitivity to its effects in the present day needs to be reflected in legislation, policy and practice. A touchstone for all our efforts to improve the system must be the extent to which they empower Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory to take control of their own destiny, and address the current circumstances that contribute to the likelihood of violence within families that today's science suggests is likely to have adverse effects across the lifespan.

It cannot be stated too bluntly that the social and economic factors identified by the CPEMRC have a profound impact on Aboriginal people and pose substantial challenges for the way child protection works with families and its capacity to effect change. Key developments such as the Aboriginal peak organisation, for children and families - SAF,T - working with families to build their capacity to keep children safe, and accessing and supporting effective kinship care arrangements will be the focus of continuing attention.

A stronger partnership between the NT and Australian governments that engages NGOs and communities more broadly is needed. The CPEMRC maintains that a strong focus on whole of government co-operation in planning and implementation of the BOI recommendations, and addressing the social factors that underpin concerns about child safety is absolutely critical. We note with approval the steps that have already been taken in this regard but urge further consideration be given as to how this can best be achieved. One way worthy of consideration would be for the Department of Children and Families in conjunction with the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to host a conference following the release of the mid-term review of progress on the BOI recommendations by DCF.

Finally, CPEMRC again recognises the enormous challenges this places on DCF to progress such fundamental systems change. The Committee commends the Executive and staff of DCF for the significant progress that has been achieved to date.



Background

The Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee (CPEMRC) has an independent monitoring role in regard to the implementation of the reforms agreed to by the Northern Territory Government following the release of the *Growing them strong, together* report of the Board of Inquiry (BOI) in October 2010 and the commitment by the NT Government of an additional \$130M over five years, an additional \$25.2M being provided in Financial Year 2011-12. The Committee which first met in February 2011 reports to the Northern Territory Parliament through the Minister for Child Protection and is required to provide a written report on the progress of implementation of the reforms twice yearly.

This is the CPEMRC's second report and covers the period from August 2011 to March 2012.

The CPEMRC has also been asked to consider the NT Ombudsman's report 'A Life Long Shadow' which was tabled in NT Parliament on 8 August 2011. The CPEMRC endorsed the planned DCF response and has subsequently been asked by the Minister for Child Protection to monitor implementation of the Ombudsman's recommendations through the Government's response to the BOI.

The Committee has now met five times – three times since the Committee's first report was tabled in the NT Legislative Assembly in August 2011. It met most recently in Tenant Creek on 1– 2 March (with a visit by some members to Kalkarindji and Ti Tree⁴ preceding the meeting), previously in Darwin and Palmerston on December 1-2 2011, and prior to that in Katherine and Darwin on August 29-30 2011.

In conjunction with meeting with DCF Executive the itineraries have included:

- Hosting discussions with two young people in care while meeting in Katherine
- Discussions with foster carers while meeting in Tennant Creek
- Community visit to Kalkarindji to hear from community members and other agencies on how child protection services can best meet their needs, one Committee member also travelled to Ti Tree and met with DCF staff from the local Safe House
- Hearing feedback from DCF frontline staff in Katherine, Palmerston, Kalkarindji, Ti Tree and Tennant Creek
- Hosting NGO forums in Katherine, Darwin and Tennant Creek to consult with the sector on the reforms
- Visiting the Youth Safe Place in Darwin to ascertain how the model of service will address the needs of young people
- Meeting with the Child Abuse Task Force and Australian Crime Commission to identify how agencies of the Australian and Northern Territory Governments can further collaborate in reforming the child protection system
- A site visit to the new Central Intake service in Darwin to better understand its role and function in relation to the workload and demand
- Meeting with the Chief Executive and senior staff of SAF,T, the new Aboriginal peak body, in Palmerston

⁴ Other members of the CPEMRC were prevented from visiting Ti Tree by bad weather which prevented landing on the airstrip.



Integral to the role of the CPEMRC and the implementation of the BOI, is the NT Children's Commissioner, Dr Howard Bath. The Committee met with Dr Bath in Katherine during the August 2011 meeting to receive a presentation on the Commissioner's expanded powers which came into legal effect on 1 July 2011. It was agreed between the Chair and Dr Bath that it would be advantageous if Dr Bath were available to observe for part of the CPEMRC meetings. This will ensure that the Commissioner's knowledge and experience of the system can be best utilised in the reform and to avoid any duplication between the Commission and the CPMERC. Dr Bath subsequently attended the second day of the March 2012 meeting.

The Chair and the Chief Executive of DCF also met with the Council of Territory Cooperation (CTC) on 6 December 2011 and the Chair subsequently met with the CTC on 6 March 2012.

In December 2011, the Committee met with the Member for Araluen, Ms Robyn Lambley MLA and had a second meeting with a representative of the NT Family and Children's Advisory Committee.

At each meeting, part of CPEMRC's business has been conducted in camera with no departmental representatives or observers present. These meetings have provided an opportunity for debriefing and formulating the Committee's position with respect to the preparation of these reports.

DCF progress in the period August to March

Overview:

This second report highlights the significant progress that has been achieved in implementing the BOI recommendations, as at 1-2 March 2012:

- 12 of 34 urgent recommendations had been implemented
- Implementation of the remaining 22 urgent recommendations was underway
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The Department identified four recommendations as behind schedule, with mitigation strategies identified to get progress back on track.

Discussions are underway with SAF,T regarding an operational model for the Aboriginal Child Care Agencies, an important development given the substantial problems being experienced in many Aboriginal families and communities and hence the challenges in recruiting and supporting Aboriginal carers.

1. Regionalisation

Regionalisation commenced in August 2011 with the release of the new DCF organisational structure which included the appointment of three new regional directors in Greater Darwin, Katherine and Northern, and Central Australia.

Enhanced support for staff in the regions is being provided through additional regional positions including a Training Officer, Courts Officer, Practice Advisor, Specialist Service Manager and a Complaints Officer.



Practice reform strategies in each of the Regions are being implemented. These strategies are targeted to meet the unique needs of the local communities and reflect Regional trends and demographics.

The beneficial impact of regionalisation on staff morale is evident from observations we have made in our series of meetings with frontline staff and comments made to us by the Opposition's spokesperson on child protection, the Member for Araluen.

2. Culture change

Cultural change strategies within DCF have had a particular focus on improving corporate and policy support of frontline staff and improving relationships with key stakeholders – carers, government and non-government partner agencies. A positive impact has been observable comparing the earliest to the most recent site visits by the CPEMRC.

KPMG has been contracted to assist in the development of a DCF Strategic Plan and a change management strategy. Consultations have commenced. A change management communications committee has been established, to provide staff on the ground with a point of engagement with the broader reform process and to provide a forum to raise issues and concerns.

A range of communication products and methods have been put in place, including a weekly CE's newsletter, a confidential email address where staff can raise issues directly with the CE, a monthly DCF Connect Newsletter for external stakeholders and a monthly public report on progress against the Board of Inquiry reforms.

In relation to external partners Foster Care NT has agreed to continue to provide feedback on progress with communication and engagement as one means of contributing to an improved culture.

3. Information systems development

While progress has been delayed several performance measures have been agreed under the *Safe Children, Bright Futures: Strategic Framework 2011-2015* and implemented in advance of the completed Performance Measurement and Evaluation Framework.

Indicators include:-

- The timeliness of the Department's response to child protection notifications
- Re-entry into the child protection system following a previous notification, investigation or substantiation
- Level of investment in non-government organisations as a proportion of DCF's overall expenditure
- The proportion of children on long term child protection orders who have stable or permanent placements
- Compliance with legislation and policy, and
- Staff turnover and frontline staff case loads.

This data is essential for the management of reform and performance and its monitoring by DFC and the CPEMRC. Attention to staff compliance with accurate data entry will need to be maintained for this data to be reliable. It is recognised that this is a challenge for busy child protection systems in all jurisdictions where face to face work with families takes precedence over administrative tasks.



Qualitative information regarding the above measures was provided to the CPEMRC in December 2011 and March 2012⁵.

4. Workforce

Staff turnover continues to be a significant issue. Contributing to turnover are the challenges of child protection practice in a culturally diverse environment, high caseloads and access to suitable housing in remote locations. CPEMRC has asked DCF to investigate the availability of appropriate benchmarks for staff turnover.

Caseload ratios are particularly high in East Arnhem and Barkly regions. The Northern Territory Government has supported aiming for caseloads of 15 -20 (maximum) for Darwin and 7-14 (maximum) outside of Darwin.

Achievements to date:

- The commitment, through learning and development, to fund staff retention strategies for remote and regional staff.
- The commencement of an incentives package for frontline staff.
- Advances have been made with regard to a co-ordinated and centralised approach to centralising the allocation of Northern Territory Government staff housing.
- Nine additional housing units in remote areas have recently been made available by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services for Community Child Safety and Wellbeing Teams staff being deployed in 2011-12 as a consequence of this strategy.
- A Remote Area Rotation initiative was also agreed with all other jurisdictions whereby other states will provide professional staff leave without pay for up to two years to work in the NT Child Protection system
- Formal pathways for the progression of administrative staff to professional streams have commenced. A senior project officer has been appointed to specifically administer this strategy and also establish career pathways for professional staff to specialise.
- The staff survey administered independently by KPMG achieved an outstanding 82% response rate. The results noted high levels of commitment and pride in the work undertaken and that teams celebrate success. Feedback about management and supervision was also provided. The results will be analysed more fully to inform the change management strategy. The survey will be undertaken bi-annually. The CPEMRC considered that the survey provides clear evidence that a shift in culture, management, leadership and morale has gained traction since the BOI report.

5. Backlog

The number of un-investigated child protection referrals at the end of February 2012 had slightly increased on previous reporting periods to 153 referrals. Six additional workers have been employed in Darwin to address the matter and it is expected that this will result in a significant reduction.

⁵ Chief Executive, Department of Children and Families, Report to the 4th meeting of the Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee, 1-2 December 2011, Darwin/Palmerston; Chief Executive, Department of Children and Families, Report to the 5th meeting of the Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee, 1-2 March 2012, Tennant Creek.



6. Training and supervision

There have been a suite of achievements to date that support the retention and capability of staff. These include:

- The project plan for the development of the DCF Strategic Workforce Plan is complete. It is expected that the fully documented Plan will be available for implementation by July 2012.
- DCF co-signed with Charles Darwin University an MOU for the next five years that
 establishes the pathway for employment of up to 25 graduates per annum into the child
 protection system, with 50 per cent of course fees to be met by DCF and five scholarships on
 offer to Territory graduates.
- A DCF-wide audit has been conducted in relation to mandatory training. This resulted in monthly reports monitoring the completion of mandatory training by new staff. Regional Directors are responsible for ensuring compliance.
- The development of online orientation modules, including specialist modules.
- A supervision policy has been introduced as one element of the workforce reform agenda. It is supported by additional training and resources.

A range of accredited training programs are being offered to support the transition of administrative to professional stream The CPEMRC recognises supervision as a key to good practice and building staff capacity. There is a strong organisational commitment evident and staff have reported an increase in their access to supervision. Maintaining this commitment needs to continue to be a focus for management in the face of high individual workloads.

7. Support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff

CPEMRC notes the steps being taken to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in policy development, career progression and practice improvement.

- An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff Advisory Group is currently finalising its Terms
 of Reference and will scope the role and functions of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
 Policy Work Unit.
- A Principal Aboriginal Practice Advisor has been appointed. This position along with Aboriginal Project Officers is rolling out the project plans to deliver on specific BOI recommendations.
- A designated officer has been appointed to review the roles of Aboriginal Community Workers and Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers to assess whether they might play a more specific role in the case management and support of children in care.
- As part of the Strategic Workforce Planning project, a designated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Plan is being developed.
- Cultural Advisors have been established in the regional offices.
- Three Indigenous staff recently graduated with a Graduate Certificate in Remote Area Practice (Child Protection) (Charles Darwin and Flinders Universities).
- Three of the scholarships available to Charles Darwin University graduates under the DCF / CDU MOU will be reserved for Indigenous students.
- A project officer has been appointed to develop career pathway strategies, including for Indigenous staff that are looking to transition from the administrative to professional stream.

Given the very high proportion of DCF clients and children in care who are Aboriginal, increasing the number and proportion of staff who are Aboriginal will be a priority well into the foreseeable future.



8. Monitoring of children in the child protection system

The responsibility of DCF to monitor the wellbeing of children in the child protection system highlights the importance of the accuracy and availability of data. The available data does require data cleansing and detailed analysis to ensure its reliability and it is noted that this is a priority of DCF. It has already been noted that staff compliance with accurate data entry is a challenge and will need to be maintained among competing work priorities.

It is Departmental policy that children who are the subject of child protection investigations should receive a face to face contact during the course of the investigation. Similarly children in care are expected to have regular face to face contact with their caseworkers.

A key trend noted in a random sample was a seeming reduction in the numbers of face to face contacts with children and young people. It should not be automatically assumed that these trends represent a decline in compliance with this is standard, but may be a consequence of increasing numbers of notifications and impact of annual leave in the last quarter. CPEMRC will monitor the trend over the next reporting period to ensure there are no systemic issues.

Placement movement is another key marker of a child's stability in care. A critical issue is the proportion of children on long term Child Protection orders, who have stable or permanent placements. However the available DCF data has limitations; the data available only reports on those children who are exiting care after 12 months or more, and does not identify placement stability for younger children and infants. The DCF Report for March 2012 shows there has been an increase in '3 or more placements' of young people who are exiting care from 37.5% in 2004 compared to 55.5% in 2011.

9. Recruitment and support of foster carers

Additional funding of \$585,000 p.a. for FosterCare NT was announced on 29 October 2011.

- The new FosterCare service commenced operation on late 2011, with dedicated staff in Darwin and Alice Springs
- The FAST program has been implemented with six delegates now trained Recruitment and retention of foster carers is an issue particularly with respect to Aboriginal carers. The Alternative Care and Support Team has been working on implementation of the foster & kinship care reforms as well as focusing on carer recruitment through festivals and show circuits in the Northern Territory.
- A recruitment exercise in 2011 resulted in more than 100 new foster carer inquiries.
- Life Without Barriers has been funded \$365,000 through a public tender process to undertake foster care assessments and fast track the available pool of carers
- The Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services has allocated new houses to five foster carers in remote communities across the Territory. A comment was made to the Committee that it is possible that suitable carers in remote communities may already be caring for extended family in overcrowded conditions. More generally, insufficient housing across Aboriginal communities is a significant issue given the known impact of overcrowding on child safety and wellbeing.
- Increasing community interest in fostering and kinship care is to be supported through a
 recruitment campaign. Menzies School of Health Research has completed a literature review
 to inform the targeting of the campaign to prospective carers and increase motivation and
 interest in supporting vulnerable children.



10. Aboriginal child placement principle and its interpretation

According to the national measure of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle the Department is tracking poorly in relation to other jurisdictions. Territory data highlights that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are being placed with extended family, kin or an Aboriginal Carer for less than 50% of the time. However, it needs to be noted that the Principle includes the option of placing the child with non-Aboriginal carers if no safe Aboriginal carers can be identified.

Although the actual number of Aboriginal carers has increased from 204 – 216 (2007-2011) after peaking at 246 in 2010, the proportion of Aboriginal children placed with non-Aboriginal carers had increased from 33.2% in 2007 to 61.3% in 2011. In part, this is reflective of significantly increased demand for placements and, with the associated difficulties of recruiting carers, the use of private providers.

It is important to recognise that the substantial problems being experienced in many Aboriginal families and communities create real challenges in recruiting and supporting Aboriginal carers. Nevertheless, it is considered both critical and possible to reverse the trend described by working more closely with Aboriginal families through the child protection process. The engagement of SAF,T in partnership with DCF and other NGOs in addressing this trend is - an important strategy that should develop over time.

11. Experience of young people in care

Anglicare and CREATE are both working with young people in care to ensure they have 'voice' in the child protection system and to ensure young people are effectively engaged in providing feedback on how best the system can best meet their needs. CREATE has been allocated an additional \$325,000 per annum to build its capacity to work closely with young people in care.

In addition, Anglicare is providing the 'moving on' program to young people leaving care. This program assists young people with transition toward independence and through the provision of support young people's experience of care can be captured and discussed with DCF.

Some young people have reported to the CPMERC they now feel more empowered to meet with the Children's Commissioner where they are heard and their issues respectfully understood.

12. NGO Partnerships

In 2010/11 DCF invested \$52 million in the non-government sector, around 36 per cent of its total expenditure. In 2011/12 investment in the non-government sector has continued to grow.

Some new investments in the sector in 2011-12 that are reform focused include:

- Funding to SAF,T for the establishment of an aboriginal peak body and to undertake the service development and capacity building of Aboriginal Child Care Agencies across the Territory.
- A one-off allocation to NTCOSS to support NGO sector workforce development and engagement with DCF around key BOI reforms, additional to substantially increased base funding.
- Increased base funding to FosterCare NT to expand service provision and to deliver the new FAST (Foster Care Advocacy Support Team) program to provide support and mentoring to foster and kinship carers.



- Funding to NAPCAN for activities including delivering Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect training to DCF staff, public and non-government sector partners.
- Substantial new family support funding commitments in Tennant Creek.
- Funding to the CREATE Foundation supporting a range of work with children and young people in care and exiting form care.
- Funding to Balanu, Life Without Barriers, Anglicare and Lifestyle Solutions for NGO provided out of home care services.

The Australian Government has also committed \$25 million up to 2014 for Intensive Family Support Services to reduce the risks of children entering the statutory care system. The Parenting Research Centre (Victoria) and Menzies School of Health Research are supporting service implementation. This funding has enabled a commitment to employ up to 100 staff by 2014.

Building positive relationships underpinned by clear pathways for services and support with the NGO sector is a major priority. On 8 September 2011 the inaugural DCF/NGO partnership forum was held, which will meet three times a year. A sub-committee has been established and has developed a policy framework and consider the model for allocating BOI funding for the NGO sector to target in the first instance, the Barkly Region.

13. Legislative reform

The CPEMRC noted that the Legislative Reform Team has had extensive consultations with internal and external stakeholders about Information Exchange and other matters to be covered in the review of the *Care and Protection of Children Act*. The Care and Protection of Children (Information Sharing) Bill was passed through Legislative Assembly in March 2012. Planning for implementation is well advanced in anticipation of the legislation coming into effect in mid-2012.

The Committee notes there are a number of legislative changes being considered and recommends investing sufficient time in ensuring the drafting is correct.

- A further stage of legislative reform is being progressed through a Major Review of the *Care and Protection of Children Act*. The Department released a consultation paper in March 2012 to seek submissions and to commence regional workshops.
- The CPEMRC noted that a range of BOI recommendations are relevant to the legislative review process, specifically:
 - Those where the intent of the BOI and the extent of the legislative change is clear. This includes 15 recommendations, specifically: Recommendations: 84, 85, 88, 89, 90, 92, 96, 97, 99, 105, 106, 112, 141, 142, and 143.
 - Those in which the intent of the Board of Inquiry recommendations is clear yet the exact legislative mechanism to achieve the intent and other implications is open to some discussion. This includes 13 recommendations. Specifically Recommendations 4, 72, 80, 81, 82, 83, 86, 91, 93, 94, 95, 107, and 108.
 - Issues not directly identified by BOI but raised by internal and external stakeholders; these are being considered and further community comment is being sought. These issues include Working with Children Clearance provisions, extending some provisions of the legislation to include unborn children and clarifying mandatory reporting requirements.

The Committee noted DCF's tentative timeframes around this next phase of reform, with an amending bill intended for introduction to the Legislative Assembly in the last quarter of 2012.



14. Interagency collaboration

CPEMRC notes that interagency collaboration is critical to the implementation of new service initiatives such as dual pathways, Multi-agency Assessment and Coordination (MAC) teams, Community Child Safety and Wellbeing teams and especially Intensive Family Support targeted at those families on income management. Timely information sharing and collaborative case management/assessment must underpin the service model.

MAC procedures, forms and process have been reshaped in order that the model is implemented in the spirit of the BOI recommendations.

A Child Safety and Wellbeing Plan for 2012 is under development that will involve each Chief Executive of a human service department in the Northern Territory Government, specifying how their core business contributes to child safety and wellbeing outcomes and committing to actions in the next twelve months. This plan will support and enable interagency collaboration and provide the necessary platform for procedural and practice change.

CPEMRC notes that engagement of NT Department of Health will be critical to the establishment of the MAC teams in Darwin and Alice Springs and the Northern Territory's capacity to comply with the National Standards for Children in Out of Home care especially respond to the National Clinical Assessment Framework for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care. CPEMRC have asked DCF to provide a progress report on Interagency collaboration and the evidence of commitment across government to the reforms.

The importance of the whole of government approach cannot be overemphasised. Both the specific developments outlined and affecting the underlying social issues that drive child safety concerns will require an ongoing commitment by agencies other than DFC in the face of their own workload demands and priorities.

15. Community Awareness

A tender was awarded in December 2011 to a consortium comprising Menzies School of Health Research, NAPCAN, Captovate and Michels Warren Mundy to develop a 5 year social marketing campaign.

This is a and ambitious strategy to engage the community in local solutions to local issues, building community competency about parenting and protecting children, as well underpinning foster and kinship care recruitment.

The Progress Report (March 2012) from the consortia noted three key work programs, namely:

- · an immediate communications audit,
- a Foster and Kinship campaign underway mid 2012, and
- a longer term community engagement strategy.

16. Appointment of new CPEMRC members

Three new committee members have been appointed since the first CPEMRC report. They are:-

- Ms Lorraine Liddle, Central Australia Ms Liddle subsequently submitted her resignation due to competing commitments (no meetings attended);
- Mr Danny Munkara, Tiwi (member for December/March meetings); and
- Ms Joyce Taylor, Barkly Region (member for March meeting).



Consistent with the CPEMRC terms of reference, the Committee is now at a full complement of members.⁶

SUMMARY

CPEMRC continues to be impressed by the depth and breadth of the reforms and the evidence from within the Department and a range of NGOs, that palpable change is occurring.

In the first report the CPEMRC acknowledged the key issues highlighted by the Department to be addressed in the change process:-

- The degree of cultural change needed within the DCF;
- The importance of communication at all levels;
- Acknowledgement of the healing process that was needed between DCF and Aboriginal people;
- Staff recruitment issues, including housing and the disparity that existed for different categories of NT Government employees;
- Pressures on frontline staff with a 12% increase in numbers of investigations;
- The need for reform of the Alternative (out-of-home) care system;
- Information systems development;
- Challenges involved in establishing the Aboriginal peak body

It is pleasing to note the significant progress that has been achieved in a number of these areas including working towards cultural change, communication within DCF and between DCF and its stakeholders, staff recruitment and the flow-on effects towards relieving workload pressures (although much remains to be done), improvements to the alternative care system and the establishment of the Aboriginal peak body. The improvement in communication within the agency and between it and many of its partner agencies was particularly noteworthy.

Although some gains have occurred in the last six months, considerable work remains to be done on information systems development and ensuring better access to staff housing in remote areas.

The Committee notes that the following issues, flagged in our first report, continue to give some concern as they are likely to affect the overall success in implementing the BOI reforms:-

Caseloads and staff turnover

These two issues are inextricably linked. Whilst the Committee notes the success in recruiting and retaining professional level staff over the last 12 months, a 37% staff turnover rate creates enormous challenges for DCF. The extent to which this differs from other government agencies in the NT has not been well described, nor has how it compares with statutory child protection authorities in other jurisdictions and we have suggested that such comparative data be obtained to enable consideration of a suitable benchmark.

We recognise that there are a range of factors that contribute to the high turnover, including the transient nature of the Northern Territory non-Aboriginal population generally, and the difficulty of recruiting staff to remote areas in the absence of satisfactory housing. We were thus particularly encouraged by the success in obtaining new housing units for up to nine Community Child Safety and Wellbeing team practitioners over the past six months.

⁶ Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee, Terms of Reference. Report of Northern Territory Child Protection External Monitoring and Reporting Committee April 2012



It is clear from the DCF report that high caseloads are a particular feature of remote communities. Whilst the Barkly and East Arnhem regions have the highest caseloads in the NT, caseloads much higher than the targets agreed to exist in many other locations including remoter areas in the Top End. The major population centres also struggle to achieve caseload targets. It would be expected that provided there is no deterioration in the social factors contributing to child maltreatment, such as poverty, mental health and drug and alcohol problems, that as the NGO sector grows and as more options for family supports and therapeutic intervention become available, the demands on casework should gradually reduce, although this is likely to be some time into the future.

CPEMRC noted the work being done to enable staff to transfer from the Administrative stream to the Professional stream, an opportunity of particular value to Aboriginal workers.

The Committee appreciated the insight to staff morale and commitment that were highlighted in the staff survey. The results provide additional insights into how staff turnover can be reduced and staff supported. While much progress has been made on learning and development, training and supervision remain important issues in staff recruitment and retention overtime.

Recruitment of Aboriginal Carers

In the last five years the number of Aboriginal children placed in all forms of out of home care has increased by 252. The proportion of Aboriginal carers for the increased numbers of Aboriginal children in care has declined from 64% to 37.8% with an increase in non-Aboriginal carers from 33.2% to 61.3%. As noted earlier, in part, these figures show that there has been significantly increased demand for placements and, with the associated difficulties of recruiting carers, requisite use of private providers.

Clearly the new peak, SAF,T has a major role in promoting the development of Aboriginal child care agencies to assist with the recruitment and training of Aboriginal carers. This agency has a number of roles and prioritisation is going to be essential if it is to build a viable pool of Aboriginal foster and kinship carers. It is noted that an evidence-based foster and carer kinship recruitment exercise will be rolled out as the first phase of DCF's Social Marketing Campaign.

Yet it is this particular issue is a fundamental concern to CPMERC. With increased numbers of Aboriginal children coming into care and a commensurate decrease in Aboriginal carers or kin, the enormity of the task confronting DCF and SAF,T cannot be underestimated. External Indigenous supports will be vital to ensuring the sustainability of SAFT.

In summary, the CPMERC in its visit to Tennant Creek was provided a salient reminder of the suite of factors that converge to cause child maltreatment. DCF cannot stop the incidence of child maltreatment. It can possibly reduce prevalence over time - but not without a whole of government approach that brings to bear the resources and leadership to address the 'upstream' drivers.

The Committee continues to recognise the substantial progress being made by DCF and its partner agencies. DCF continues to be accountable and responsive. However the complexity and depth of change cannot be underestimated, as well as recognition that this change will take time before substantial improvements in community wellbeing are evident.



Achieving cultural change

Achieving changes in organisational culture is always challenging. They are assisted by early adopters who generally make up 10% of an organisation's workforce who help influence the next 80% in the change process. But in most organisations around 10% are late adopters who hope and believe that the change will, like this year's latest fad, go away and the status quo will prevail. This proportion may be higher in organisations where the nature of the work induces higher rates of staff burnout and resistance to change becomes a means of self-preservation. Whilst there is substantial evidence of cultural change occurring within DCF, there is also unsurprisingly, evidence within the organisation and from comments made by partner organisations that more work to bring about change is needed. It is important that those leading the change process (who gain strength from their peers who are also committed to change) are not misled by the support they perceive exists, and recognise that "embedded ways of working" are amazingly resilient. It is important to continue to monitor the pace of change throughout the organisation and through the perceptions held by partner agencies.

The Context of Child Protection in the Northern Territory

We reiterate our comments in the first report about the context in which the Northern Territory child protection system operates. Achieving reforms in legislation, culture and practice is difficult enough in any jurisdiction, but is dwarfed by the impact of the geographical, climatic, historical and contemporary social circumstances (including the insufficiency of suitable housing) in the Northern Territory that contribute to the challenge of preventing and responding effectively to child maltreatment which disproportionately affects the Territory's Aboriginal children and young people.

We acknowledge that history cannot be changed but sensitivity to its effects in the present day needs to be reflected in legislation, policy and practice. A touchstone for all our efforts to improve the system must be the extent to which they empower Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory to take control of their own destiny, and address the current circumstances that contribute to the likelihood of violence within families that today's science suggests is likely to have adverse effects across the lifespan. To achieve this whole of government responses involving the NT and Australian governments that engage with NGOs and communities more broadly are needed. We note with approval the steps that have already been taken in this regard and the high degree of collaboration between the Territory Government and the Australian Government that already exists, but urge further consideration be given as to how this can best be achieved. One way worthy of consideration would be for the Department of Children and Families in conjunction with the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to host a conference following the release of the mid-term review of progress on the BOI recommendations by DCF.



Committee Members, April 2012

Chair, Professor Graham Vimpani AM, Professor of Community Child Health and Head of the Discipline of Pediatrics and Child Health at the University of Newcastle

Frank Hytten, CEO Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

Terry Murphy, Director General, Department for Child Protection, Western Australia

Teresa Neihus, President, Foster Care NT

Jacqui Reed, Chief Executive Officer, CREATE Foundation

Professor Sven Silburn, Director, Developmental Health and Education, Menzies School of Health Research

Danny Munkara, member of the Nguiu Community Management Board and Tiwi Land Council Joyce Taylor, Regional Manager Indigenous Education, Barkly Region.