

<p>Submission</p> <p>No 9</p>

INQUIRY INTO FOLLOW UP OF AUDITOR-GENERAL'S 2010 FINANCIAL AUDIT REPORTS

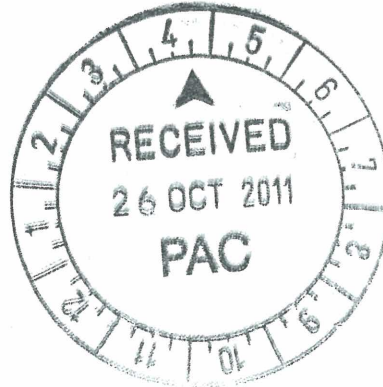
Organisation: Department of Family & Community Services
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Position: A/Director General
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Date Received: 26/10/2011

Theme:

Summary



Mr J O'Dea MP
Chair
Public Accounts Committee
Legislative Assembly
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000



25 OCT 2011

Dear Mr O'Dea

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission outlining the Department of Family and Community Services response to the Auditor-General's recommendation that the former Department of Human Services adhere to statutory requirements by ensuring placements reviews for children and young people in out-of-home care are undertaken at appropriate intervals.

The Department's response is attached. With regard to feedback on the audit process, it may be more appropriate for the Department to consider this at a future date, once the structural changes necessitated by the super department amalgamations and recent departmental reforms are bedded down.

If the Committee requires any further information in relation to this matter, please contact Ms Lesley Milbourne, Director Governance, on 9716 2958.

Yours sincerely

Jim Moore
A/Director General

**Community Services Response to NSW Public Accounts Committee – October 2011
Regarding Auditor-General's Financial Audit Repeat Recommendations**

Auditor-General's Recommendation

Extract from Auditor-General's Report to Parliament 2010 Volume 6, p55

Out-of-Home Care Placement Reviews (Repeat Issue)

I recommend the Department of Human Services adhere to statutory requirements by ensuring Community Services placement reviews for children and young persons in Out-of-Home Care are undertaken at appropriate intervals.

Placement reviews for children in OOHC are not always performed at appropriate intervals that meet statutory requirements. Section 150 of the Children and Young Persons (Care & Protection) Act 1998 requires the placement of the child or young person to be reviewed at least every 12 months. We have reported this matter for several years. Management advised this issue is being addressed through a project to transfer an increasing number of OOHC placements to the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) sector, and as part of the work towards obtaining full accreditation from the Children's Guardian. Community Services advised it has also completed a review of caseworker caseloads.

Response:

For many years, Community Services (now a division of the Department of Family and Community Services, and previously the Department of Community Services) has been challenged by the volume of child protection reports and the increasing number of children requiring OOHC support.

The Office of the Children's Guardian monitors the responsibilities of all agencies providing OOHC services under the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998. In 2003 Community Services was given interim accreditation as a designated agency for the provision of out-of-home care (OOHC) and is currently participating in the Children's Guardian quality improvement program which requires Community Services meet all of the NSW OOHC standards by June 2013.

Only accredited agencies, known as "designated agencies", may place or arrange the placement of children and young people in court ordered (statutory) OOHC in NSW. The accreditation process necessitates that an agency provide the Children's Guardian with both indirect evidence e.g. policy and procedure; and direct evidence e.g. casework practice, that it is complying with the standards.

Community Services has provided the Children's Guardian with indirect evidence for all standards and is participating in a program of case file audits and onsite assessments to enable OCG staff to assess direct evidence. Community Services is working with the Children's Guardian to develop an onsite assessment program for 2012.

The next case file audit, for 2011/12, commenced in September 2011. This audit will focus on education as well as assess practice on general casework processes (as done in previous audits) such as case planning and child / young person / parent / carer participation.

Community Services is working closely with the Children's Guardian to ensure strategies identified in the Community Services Quality Improvement Plan address the areas for development identified. In particular, a new case planning template and framework incorporates placement and case plan reviews. It is policy to complete the case plan review for allocated cases.

However, Community Services has faced a significant challenge in meeting accreditation standards, primarily because Community Services operates on much higher caseloads (1:29) than

agencies who have achieved accreditation with lower average caseloads of around 1:12. Community Services engaged Ernst & Young to conduct a caseload benchmark study which was completed in 2010. The study determined Community Services would need to increase its caseworker resources by about 40 per cent if it was to achieve an accreditable standard of casework practice on the current settings where it is the provider of 80 per cent of direct OOHC services in NSW.

Rather than increase Community Services caseworker resources, the issue will be addressed through the current OOHC Reform Program which is progressing a number of recommendations from the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW, undertaken by the Hon James Wood AO QC in 2008.

The Commission's report recognised that the contemporary challenge facing all child protection systems in Australia, and in particular NSW as the largest, is sufficiently resourcing flexible prevention and early intervention services so as to reduce the numbers of children and young people who require the state to step in to keep them safe.

The report noted that: there are increasing numbers of children and young people in out-of-home care for longer periods of time and with increasingly complex needs at a cost per child which continues to rise; there is a decreasing pool of foster carers to care for these children; and there is a need for a greater number and range of different placement options for children and young people for whom it is not safe to live at home.

The Commission recommended that the child protection system should comprise integrated universal, secondary and tertiary services, with universal services comprising the greater proportion. They should be delivered by a mixture of the non-government sector and state agencies, with Community Services being a provider of last resort.

A key recommendation was that the responsibility for out-of-home care should progressively be transferred to the non-government sector (NGOs). The Government is committed to gradually transitioning the majority of OOHC provision to the NGOs and this year established a Ministerial Advisory Group of government and non-government representatives and an OOHC Taskforce to facilitate the process. The Ministerial Advisory Group will agree on a transition plan and advise the Minister for Family and Community Services by the end of 2011, with the plan to commence in the 2011/12 year. Other initiatives are underway to curb the entry of children to OOHC, such as reframing early intervention programs and family support and restoration pilots.

As more OOHC provision transitions to the NGOs, Community Services' caseload ratios will reduce. This will increase the capacity to allocate cases and of caseworkers to undertake quality casework for those children who remain case managed by Community Services and to meet statutory requirements and accreditation standards. Timely placement reviews for all OOHC cases will not be resolved until a greater percentage of OOHC is transferred to the NGO sector.