

Standing Committee on Social Issues

# **Early Child Development: A Co-ordinated Approach**

First Report on Early  
Intervention for Children with  
Learning Difficulties

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## Terms of Reference

That the Standing Committee on Social Issues inquire into and report on early intervention into learning difficulties during the early childhood years (ages 0-8), including the following:

- The appropriate role of parents, government departments, non-government agencies and educational organisations in the development, delivery and evaluation of early intervention programs.
- The adequacy of roles and responsibilities and interagency cooperation around early intervention programs for learning difficulties in NSW.
- The ways in which early intervention practice in NSW might be informed by practice in other States of Australia and overseas, including evidence of the impact of early intervention on child protection, juvenile justice and intensive education programs.
- Research into world's best practice in developing effective strategies to increase awareness and responsibility for assisting families in parenting skills, identifying learning difficulties and early intervention.
- Maximising the effectiveness of assessment and early identification in ensuring improved learning outcomes from schooling for children experiencing learning difficulties.
- Support available to families and communities to enable them to be better able to assist their children with learning difficulties.
- Any other relevant matters.

The primary emphasis of the Inquiry is on the evaluation and development of programs for children with learning difficulties who with appropriate early intervention would be able to achieve age appropriate outcomes throughout their schooling.

These terms of reference were referred to the Committee by the Hon John Auliana MP, Minister for Education and Training on 4 August 2000.

## Committee Membership

Jan Burnswoods, MLC, **Australian Labor Party, Chair**

The Hon James Samios, MLC, **Liberal Party, Deputy Chair**

*From June 2002*

The Hon Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans, MLC, **Australian Democrats**

The Hon Amanda Fazio, MLC, **Australian Labor Party**

The Hon Ian West, MLC, **Australian Labor Party**

The late Hon Doug Moppett, MLC, National Party, served as Deputy Chair on the Committee until 14 June 2002.

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## Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to present the first report of the Committee's inquiry into early intervention for children with learning difficulties.

Throughout the inquiry parents and professionals alike told us that if we were serious about preventing and alleviating learning problems, we would need to address the systemic issues that beset early childhood services in this State. The fragmented nature of the sector was a particular concern because of the tendency for children with learning difficulties to 'fall through the cracks' of service provision and policy development.

On the basis of what we have heard, read and seen, we feel compelled to take a bold approach to improve children's learning potential. This report recommends the creation of a new portfolio and a Department of Child Development in New South Wales. The Minister and Department will champion the cause of child development and its relationship to the social and economic functioning of the State. They will address concerns about co-ordination by bringing the disparate elements of early childhood services under the one roof. The new Department will be the ideal base for *Families First* and other strategies which seek to prevent problems from occurring in the first place.

Very similar findings regarding the importance of a comprehensive and co-ordinated system of prevention and early intervention are made in our interim report for the inquiry into child protection services. We have released the two reports simultaneously in order to underline the fact that all children stand to gain from a renewed focus on the early years.

Our focus on systemic issues has not precluded a thorough examination of the many specific ways to address children's learning problems, such as the availability of specialist support teachers in primary schools and the provision of therapy services. These and many other issues were canvassed extensively in our Issues Paper in March 2002 and will be dealt with in the second report, which will be tabled later this year.

We are always grateful to the people who participate in our inquiries. Indeed, the involvement of individual citizens and representative agencies is crucial for the work of parliamentary committees. We are especially aware that most of you work long hours and under considerable pressure, either directly with or on behalf of children and families. We thank you for your vital contributions.

This report is dedicated to the memory of our former Deputy Chair, the late Hon Doug Moppett MLC. Although he advised us against using our inquiries to 'change the world', this was exactly what he sought to achieve in his political life. We truly miss his wisdom, warmth and profound knowledge of the English language.

I commend this report to the Government

**Jan Burnswoods MLC**

**Chair**

## Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1**      *Page 5*

The Government should establish a new Ministerial portfolio and Department responsible for child development in New South Wales. A suggested name for this new agency is the Department of Child Development.

### **Recommendation 2**      *Page 10*

The scheduled transfer of *Families First* from The Cabinet Office in July 2003 should be postponed until the establishment of the proposed new Department of Child Development, at which point it would be transferred to this new agency.



# Chapter 1 Introduction

We have lost any sense of an integrated coordinated approach to the development of children, and government departments operate as silos, in isolation from and often in costly competition with one another.<sup>1</sup>

This is the **first** report of the inquiry into children with learning difficulties. It is primarily concerned with the systemic issues relating to early childhood development in New South Wales. The **second** report will deal with more specific issues and initiatives relevant to children with learning difficulties and will be tabled later in the year.

This introductory chapter explains why an inquiry primarily designed to consider the needs of children with learning difficulties led us to examine the systems and structures related to children's health, learning and behaviour. It also includes background information about the progress of the inquiry. Chapter 2 presents a rationale for a new portfolio and Department of Child Development, which we believe is the best way to address the system-wide problems that beset services for children in this State.

**This report** is released together with our **interim report** for the **inquiry into child protection services**, which raises similar concerns about early childhood services. The simultaneous release of these two reports is designed to underline the need for a comprehensive and co-ordinated system of prevention and early intervention in New South Wales.

## From learning difficulties to child development

- 1.1** Families with young children face increasing pressures in our complex and rapidly changing world. In Australia, the rates of domestic violence, drug and alcohol use, gambling and divorce have increased. Twenty one per cent of all children have one natural parent living outside of their household.<sup>2</sup> One of the most dramatic changes to family life over the past three decades is that an increasing number of children spend a greater part of their early childhood being cared for by people who are not their parents, in a sometimes complex combination of formal and informal care. Commentators talk about a 'famine of parental time' in the growing number of families where both parents work.
- 1.2** Our two inquiries, into children with learning difficulties and into child protection, indicate that 'the system' has not kept up with the changing needs of children and families and that:

<sup>1</sup> Edgar D., *The Patchwork Nation, Re-thinking Government – Rebuilding Community*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2001, p.145

<sup>2</sup> Inquiry into Child Protection Services, Submission 248, Department of Community Services

Parents are living in a “half-changed” world, being left to craft private solutions to problems with enormous public implications.<sup>3</sup>

- 1.3** Both inquiries have found an under-emphasis on the importance of prevention and early intervention and a serious fragmentation of the early childhood sector. This is despite worrying data on child health outcomes and the virtual explosion of scientific evidence demonstrating the incontrovertible link between the early years and later development and health.
- 1.4** We can and should do much better. While the rates of key indicators for physical health, such as SIDS, spina bifida and vaccine-preventable diseases are much improved, other indicators of children’s wellbeing, such as mental health problems and obesity, are on the rise.<sup>4</sup> According to the long awaited NSW Child Health Survey 2001, almost one third of children aged 4-12 years were reported to have emotional or behavioural problems, reflecting the findings of a recent national survey which found that 15 per cent of children in the same age group had emotional or behavioural problems in the ‘clinical range’.<sup>5</sup>
- 1.5** In this report we argue that a new approach is required to address the problems that beset early childhood services in New South Wales, through the creation of a new Ministerial portfolio and Department of Child Development. This Department is necessary to provide the strong political leadership and status that early childhood requires. The Department will enhance the co-ordination of early intervention services, provide a greater focus on evidence-based prevention programs, and most importantly will provide a base for the significant expansion of the *Families First* strategy. Our rationale is expanded in Chapter 2.

## The social context of learning

Many of the learning difficulties that children have can be linked in part to infant health issues or to negative early life experiences and traumas.<sup>6</sup>

- 1.6** The term ‘learning difficulties’ has been used to describe children who have problems with literacy and numeracy learning. The causes of learning problems are varied. They may be caused by intrinsic factors, such as an intellectual or visual impairment. They may also stem from a child’s environment, such as poor quality parental or non-parental care or because the language used in school is different to a child’s home language. Depending on the

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<sup>3</sup> Marcia Meyers, School of Social Work, University of Washington, Seattle, 6th National Headstart Research Conference, June 2002, Washington DC

<sup>4</sup> *The Bulletin*, 15 January, 2002, p.20

<sup>5</sup> NSW Child Health Survey 2001, *NSW Public Health Bulletin Supplement*, Vol 13, No S-3, September 2002, NSW Department of Health, pp.42-43

<sup>6</sup> Select Standing Committee on Education, *A Future for Learners: A Vision for Renewal of Education in British Columbia*, the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2002, p.23

definition used, about 15 per cent of school-aged children have learning difficulties and of these, approximately 10 per cent<sup>7</sup> stem from environmental factors.

- 1.7 In some cases, children with learning difficulties come from abusive or neglectful homes. In many cases they do not. The fact is that *all* children will benefit from a co-ordinated, well-resourced early childhood system with a strong preventative focus, especially those who are vulnerable to learning problems.

### **An under-emphasis on early intervention**

- 1.8 A fundamental problem highlighted by both inquiries is the under-emphasis on preventative population-based services to promote children's development and the attendant human and economic costs of this deficiency. It is now well understood that a comprehensive and coherent approach to supporting early childhood development is required to maximise the wellbeing of children in this State, but this knowledge has not yet been translated into practice. Service systems for children tend to intervene late and to focus on crisis or acute need.
- 1.9 Children with learning difficulties in particular suffer from this imbalance because their needs are invariably seen as a lower priority than children with a diagnosed disability or more 'serious' problems. As a result, very few programs or services are specifically designed to assist such children, who often find themselves at the bottom of waiting lists for a range of services largely intended to help those with more obvious needs. Parents told us that in the absence of timely early intervention, they observed their children's minor difficulties turn into major problems requiring much more intensive support. Peak bodies cited extensive research demonstrating the much greater socio-economic costs of 'late' intervention.
- 1.10 In the child protection inquiry, witnesses told us that the escalation in spending on investigating reports of abuse has seriously undermined the focus on and funding to family support and child development, and has therefore failed to reduce the number of notifications of children at risk.

### **The fragmented nature of children's services**

- 1.11 Time and again the Committee was told that the unco-ordinated nature of early childhood services is a major barrier to helping children with any sort of difficulties, including learning problems. Three levels of government, four separate agencies within the New South Wales Government, as well as numerous non-government organisations, are responsible for children's services, each with their own policy objectives, planning processes and funding criteria. In addition, there is a tendency for professionals to work within their own professional silos and so contribute to this fragmentation. The complexity of early childhood services means that they are not as effective as they should be in supporting children and families.

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<sup>7</sup> Submission 18, Department of Education and Training

- 1.12 Fragmentation is a particular problem for children with learning difficulties and their families who have to negotiate their way around a complex system which does not specifically cater for their needs.

## **Background to the Inquiry**

- 1.13 This inquiry was referred to the Committee by the former Minister for Education and Training, the Hon John Aquilina MP, in August 2000. The Committee received 107 submissions in response to the publication of the inquiry terms of reference. We also took evidence from 36 witnesses including academics, representatives of government and non-government agencies, and parents. In May 2001 we held a consultation meeting with members of the Mt Druitt-Blacktown Learning Difficulties Support Group and undertook a four day study tour to Melbourne and Perth.
- 1.14 In March 2002 we launched an Issues Paper at a seminar at Parliament House which was attended by 100 people. In July 2002 the Committee visited several early intervention programs in north west New South Wales, including Dubbo, Trangie, Coonamble and Quambone. In September 2002, the Committee hosted a meeting with Canadian early child development expert, Dr Fraser Mustard and key members of the children's services sector. A complete list of submissions, witnesses, visits, seminars and meetings will be presented in the second report.

### **Issues Paper, March 2002**

- 1.15 Many of the original submissions to the Committee suggested that, in addition to finding ways to assist individual children with learning problems, we should address fundamental concerns about the fragmentation of early childhood services in this State. While various 'systemic solutions' were suggested, these ideas were not presented in fine detail and there was no consensus on the best way forward.
- 1.16 In order to clarify participants' ideas about the nature and type of reforms required to enhance children's learning, the Committee published an Issues Paper. The paper included 69 questions covering a wide range of complex and often controversial issues. The Committee received more than 80 extra submissions in response, providing a valuable source of information on which to base our findings and recommendations for both reports.
- 1.17 This report is based largely on responses to the final chapter of the Issues Paper, Chapter 9, *Finding Solutions*. The second report will examine more specific matters relevant to children with learning difficulties, including the role of general practitioners and child and family health nurses, family support programs, childcare and preschool, school entry, teachers and schools, children with specific learning difficulties and therapy services.

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## Chapter 2 A new vision for the early years in NSW

... I think we are at the point of saying we need to do this differently.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter outlines our vision for a more co-ordinated and effective early childhood system. A recurrent theme throughout this inquiry has been the need to overcome fragmentation in the early childhood sector. One of the most far-reaching and promising solutions offered to date is the proposal to establish a new agency for early childhood education and care in New South Wales. We believe such an agency will address many of the current concerns people share about the co-ordination and status of early childhood services in this State. The chapter begins with a brief description of what the new agency would do, followed by a rationale for its creation.

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### Recommendation 1

The Government should establish a new portfolio and department responsible for child development in New South Wales. A suggested name for this new agency is the Department of Child Development.

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### The role of the Department of Child Development

- 2.1** The following is intended as a starting point for future discussion about a new child development agency. It is by no means a definitive model. Of those respondents who supported the notion of a single agency, Professor Graham Vimpani from the University of Newcastle, provided the greatest level of detail. Our model draws on some, but not all, of the ideas presented to the Committee by Professor Vimpani. We have provisionally called this proposed new agency the *Department of Child Development*.
- 2.2** The Department's mission would be to promote the physical, emotional, educational and social development of children. It would develop a co-ordinated service structure to support families and promote child development and a shared set of cross-agency outcomes. The new Department would be responsible for the full range of existing early years programs including:
- *Families First*
  - The NSW Parenting Centre
  - Policy development, regulation and funding responsibilities for childcare and preschool services.
- 2.3** Given the indisputable link between high quality children's services and healthy child development, particularly within disadvantaged communities, an essential role of the new

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<sup>8</sup> John O'Brien, Burnside, evidence, 21 March 2001

Department would be to urge the full implementation of the *NSW Early Childhood Services Policy* including the injection of funds required to ensure the policy is implemented.

- 2.4** Not all personnel and programs relevant to young children would need to be transferred to the new Department. For example, vital services are provided by child and family nurses employed by NSW Health and the Department of Education and Training's 100 preschools. In such cases, the Department of Child Development could enter into contractual agreements with other government agencies around minimum levels and standards of service provision. However, the budget for these services should be transferred to the new Department to ensure it has effective control over integral aspects of early child development.
- 2.5** The new Department could also play a role in policies and programs for children over the age of eight. Our inquiry into child protection has made us aware of the vacuum in services for older children and we are conscious of the need not to exclude these children from the Department's ambit.

## The rationale

- 2.6** The rationale for the establishment of a new Department consists of four main arguments. First, a new Department will provide clear leadership in the early childhood area and give child development the bureaucratic and political status it deserves. Second, it will provide a greater focus on evidence-based prevention programs. Third, a new Department will enhance the co-ordination of early intervention services. Fourth, it is the optimal location for the *Families First* strategy.

## A much needed focus on children

- 2.7** It is now widely accepted by governments around the world that 'investing' in children is an investment in human capital, and a dynamic economy and culture.<sup>9</sup> In the Committee's view, a new agency is required to ensure that our knowledge about the importance of child development is translated into practice. A new portfolio and Department would demonstrate the Government's firm commitment to children and their critical role in the future wealth and vibrancy of this State. It is a necessary step to overcome the existing diffused responsibility for early childhood.
- 2.8** Overseas jurisdictions which have accepted the fundamental importance of child development have also established new departments or portfolios for child development, and in Australia the Commonwealth government recently appointed a Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. According to Canadian early childhood expert, Dr Fraser Mustard, such steps are a fundamental way to advance the new agenda in early intervention.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Young M.E,(ed) *From Early Child Development to Human Development: Investing in our Children's Future*, World Bank, March, 2002 p.5

<sup>10</sup> Mustard, F. Social Issues Committee Seminar, Parliament House, 12 September 2002, Hansard transcript of proceedings

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## An ‘outcomes’ approach to prevention

**2.9** Over the past decade, researchers and policy makers have developed a more sophisticated understanding of the best ways to prevent and alleviate problems in young children. The Minister for Community Services, the Hon Carmel Tebbutt MLC, referred to this new approach to early intervention as being:

... evidence-based, it is about being multi-agency, and it is premised on early intervention as a fundamental principle.<sup>11</sup>

**2.10** We now know that programs that focus on the population as a whole, such as home visiting, tend to be more effective than clinical services that respond to individuals with identified problems.<sup>12</sup> For example, high quality childcare can prevent the development of learning difficulties in children from disadvantaged families. This does not mean we forget about helping children with already established problems. It is more a matter of emphasis:

“Early intervention” should mean early enough to avoid the problem, if that is what a society can afford to do. That doesn’t mean we stop trying to fix problems that already exist. This is not an either/or choice. But, as we slowly learn from experience what are causes and what are symptoms, let’s also learn how to evolve our spending so that we spend properly on causes.<sup>13</sup>

**2.11** As several respondents have pointed out, our current system is far more focussed on care or clinical services than population-level interventions:

We know that these kids’ outcomes are dependent on how they are raised. The evidence is profound on that. Yet, we are quite happy to continue to bring in bandaids services for which we have no evidence of efficacy.<sup>14</sup>

**2.12** Witnesses to the child protection inquiry have also commented on the tendency for the ‘hard end’ of child protection to draw attention away from preventative family support services. A key role of a new agency would be to advocate a new approach to early intervention. It would seek to redress the current imbalance between population health and clinical care services by advocating greater investment in proven preventative strategies and a commitment among agencies to shared outcomes. It would also encourage professionals who work at either end of the prevention spectrum (primary prevention through to tertiary prevention) to understand and respect their complementary roles.

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<sup>11</sup> Inquiry into Child Protection, Hon Carmel Tebbutt MLC, evidence, 19 August 2002

<sup>12</sup> Nossar evidence, 20 August 2002

<sup>13</sup> Submission 174, Association of Child Care Centres of NSW

<sup>14</sup> Nossar evidence, 20 August 2002

## Integrated policies and services

- 2.13** There is clear evidence that early intervention services have the greatest impact when they address a broad range of issues and are provided as part of a co-ordinated network.<sup>15</sup>
- 2.14** This need for co-ordinated support and services at the local level has been one of the most pressing issues raised during this inquiry. Parents of children with learning difficulties provided moving accounts of having to negotiate a time and energy-consuming merry-go-round of agencies and therapists. Relief was only available if they were lucky enough to encounter a program or service which had specific funding or personnel to help link them to appropriate services. Good examples include the *Connect Five* program in north west NSW and the mid-North Coast's *Wrap around Kids* program for children with ADHD and other learning difficulties.
- 2.15** There are as many ways of achieving co-ordinated early childhood services as there are good reasons to do it. The integration of various services such as childcare, family support and child health, usually under the one roof, has been a key strategy in seeking to offer services in a contiguous and holistic way in Canada and the United Kingdom. We are aware of a recent research study commissioned by the Department of Community Services (DoCS) which recommends piloting and evaluating a flexible children's model known as A Child and Family Service.<sup>16</sup> One of the recommendations of the recent NSW Child Obesity Summit was to establish 'multipurpose child and family centres'.<sup>17</sup>
- 2.16** During the course of the inquiry, the Committee has encountered numerous examples of effective local projects which seek to streamline service delivery. But many of these projects were unable to gain ongoing funding. The potential consequences, as Dorothy Scott points out, are that: 'families are hurt by the withdrawal of a service, valuable staff and expertise are lost, and interagency goodwill is weakened'.<sup>18</sup>
- 2.17** A Department of Child Development could explore, pilot and evaluate innovative ways to provide integrated 'one-stop shop' support to children and families at the local level. The Department would not allow successful local initiatives to flounder: it would ensure effective projects receive ongoing funding and their ideas are widely disseminated. In addition, it would provide the bureaucratic back-up to maximise their success. As a recent United Kingdom House of Commons report on public health noted:

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<sup>15</sup> Alperstein. G. and Nossar., V, Can the *Families First* initiative contribute to reducing health inequalities?, *NSW Public Health Bulletin*, Vol. 13, No 3 p.39

<sup>16</sup> Duffie. J., *NSW Flexible Models Project, Final Report*, Centre for Community Child Health and Lady Gowrie Child Centre, Melbourne , September 2001

<sup>17</sup> NSW Childhood Obesity Summit, Communique, 12 September 2002, p.7

<sup>18</sup> Scott D., Building communities that strengthen families, *Family Matters*, in press



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We have heard time and again how insufficient collaboration at central government level had made it very difficult for partnerships to work at local level, because of overlapping partnership requirements, the use of different performance management targets, progress indicators and funding arrangements, not to mention different working cultures.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ensuring a whole of government focus**

- 2.18** Ministerial input from other relevant portfolios would be critical to ensure cross-portfolio ownership and commitment to the new agency. In the United Kingdom, cross-portfolio collaboration is encouraged by the following arrangements. A junior Education Minister is responsible for Early Years initiatives, the Minister of Education reports to the Cabinet on these matters and the Minister for Public Health answers questions in the House on the *Sure Start* program.<sup>20</sup> A similar combination of ministerial responsibilities could be constructed in the New South Wales context to emphasise the cross-cutting nature of child development.
- 2.19** Another important way to encourage co-ordination between agencies and services is the development of common targets and progress indicators for all cross-departmental initiatives.

### **An ideal base for *Families First***

- 2.20** The *Families First* strategy was widely supported in submissions and evidence to the Committee. Participants had either observed greater co-operation in their areas as a result of the strategy, or believed the strategy was likely to generate positive change. They believe that the programs that underlie *Families First* are evidence-based<sup>21</sup> and that the strategy has been very effectively co-ordinated by The Cabinet Office, a central government agency with 'clout'.
- 2.21** However, support for the strategy was qualified. Until very recently children's services have not been key players in *Families First*. While we are aware The Cabinet Office and DoCS are trying to address this issue, it is likely that given the virtual absence of regional structures for children's services' co-ordination, further integration will only be achieved by establishing a new agency.
- 2.22** The other major concern about *Families First* was related to the scheduled transfer of the strategy to DoCS in July 2003. There was no support for this move, for the reasons outlined by the current Director-General, Dr Neil Shepherd, in evidence to the Committee's child protection inquiry:

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<sup>19</sup> United Kingdom Parliament, Select Committee on Health, Second Report, 240, p.6 [www.publications.parliament.uk](http://www.publications.parliament.uk)

<sup>20</sup> *Sure Start* is an initiative of the British Government to improve the health and well being of families and children before and from birth so children are ready to flourish when they go to school.

<sup>21</sup> Alperstein G and Nossar V., Can the Families First initiative contribute to reducing health inequalities? *NSW Public Health Bulletin*, Vol.13, No. 3 pp38-41

... DoCS is nowhere near ready to take over the holding of this program. It is far better that it remains with the central agency.... The other thing is that there are enough things on DoCS plate right now without adding anything else. That program is too important to risk.

- 2.23** A large proportion of respondents believe that even if DoCS emerges from its present difficulties, it should not assume carriage of *Families First* because it does not make sense, conceptually, to place a population-based, outcomes-focussed initiative such as *Families First* in an agency which is supposed to focus on responding to individuals' problems.<sup>22</sup> While Dr Neil Shepherd believes DoCS is the logical home for the strategy and it should be transferred eventually, his evidence suggests he may also be open to other options:

There are other possible locations. Those agencies provide the force of co-ordination and credibility that DoCS would find it difficult to sustain at this time.

- 2.24** According to Dr Nossar, opposition to the transfer should not reflect poorly on the Department or its staff:

The staff in DoCS are just as committed to *Families First* as we are, they are great partners....It is not about DoCS doing its job, it is a different cultural ethos.<sup>23</sup>

- 2.25** As the child protection interim report notes, DoCS should not have responsibility for primary prevention strategies. Its primary role should be to support families who need targeted or more intensive forms of early intervention. In our view the proposed new Department, with its broad population health focus, would be the most suitable agency to co-ordinate *Families First*. Pending the outcome of the evaluation of *Families First*, it would provide a base from which this highly regarded strategy could expand and flourish.

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### **Recommendation 2**

The scheduled transfer of *Families First* from The Cabinet Office in July 2003 should be postponed until the establishment of the proposed new Department of Child Development, at which point it would be transferred to this new agency.

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## **Making sure the Department works**

- 2.26** In overseas jurisdictions where there have been major early years reforms, there have been two common elements in their successful implementation: the agenda has been driven by an influential advocate and there has been a major review of government spending priorities.

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<sup>22</sup> Submission 151, Association of Child Welfare Agencies and Submission 141, Burnside

<sup>23</sup> Nossar evidence 20 August 2002, p.18

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## The importance of leadership in establishing a new agency

- 2.27 In the two places commonly cited as exemplars of early years reforms: the Canadian province of Ontario and the United Kingdom, the role of key individuals is seen as critical to the success of their reform agendas. In Ontario, former Premier Mike Harris' commitment to early years reforms generated major changes to early childhood services. Tony Blair's 'tough political leadership' and the passion and commitment of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, led to a major overhaul of the early childhood system in the United Kingdom.<sup>24</sup> As the Committee was told, the importance of 'driving individuals' in policy reform should not be underestimated.<sup>25</sup>

## A major injection of funding for child development

- 2.28 While participants in both the child protection and learning difficulties inquiries acknowledge that some problems relating to early intervention can be addressed by spending existing money more wisely, there are nevertheless some areas that clearly require an injection of funds. Specific funding requirements will be discussed in the final reports for both inquiries, but the general observation is that New South Wales spending on children and families compares poorly to other states and countries, and that without extra funding, the potential benefits of valuable programs such as *Families First* may not be fully realised. As Professor Vimpani told us:

*Families First* is only modestly resourced. New British Government initiatives outlined in the recent Spending Review (July 2002) will amount to 1.5 billion pounds annually. These include increased availability of child care, the extension of *Sure Start* to cover the 20% of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the country and universal preschool availability for all three and four year olds. Even when Commonwealth funds expended in NSW through the Stronger Families and Communities strategy are added to the NSW investment, together they fall far short of what Britain is doing.<sup>26</sup>

- 2.29 Professor Vimpani estimates that on a per capita basis, the UK Government spends approximately ten times more on early intervention programs than is spent by the State and Commonwealth Governments on similar initiatives in New South Wales.<sup>27</sup> In a recent article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, journalist Adele Horin reported that in comparison with other states and territories, by 2001 New South Wales had fallen to second-last position in its overall social spending (welfare, education health and transport) and now spends less per head on child and family welfare than Victoria and a good deal less than West Australia.<sup>28</sup> It is also interesting to note that the New South Wales Government allocated

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<sup>24</sup> Mustard, op cit, p.4

<sup>25</sup> Nossar evidence 20 August 2002, p.18

<sup>26</sup> Vimpani evidence, 14 August 2002

<sup>27</sup> Vimpani evidence, 14 August 2002, p.6

<sup>28</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7-8 September 2002, p 53

\$131.3 million in 2002-2003 to child protection services, compared to the \$18.1 million dollars allocated to *Families First*.<sup>29</sup>

- 2.30** A report published by the World Bank in 2002 noted that the knowledge base to support large-scale investments in early childhood development is 'more than sufficient' and there is no dispute that investing in young children is an essential investment in human economic development.<sup>30</sup> Armed with greater evidence of cost effective interventions, a major injection of funding to early intervention and prevention makes political and economic sense.

### Concerns about a new agency

- 2.31** Several respondents identified the possible disadvantages of establishing a new agency for children. The NSW Children's Forum said that while they were pleased the Committee recognises the existence of significant systemic problems in the sector, they were wary of 'attempting to find neat solutions to complex issues' and urged the Committee to establish a separate inquiry to sort through the complexities of children's services' funding and delivery.<sup>31</sup>
- 2.32** The Committee does not support holding another inquiry to examine systemic issues in children's services. The problems have been identified in numerous reports over the past decade and there have been few changes as a result. We would agree more detailed work is needed to sort out some of these difficulties, but believe a new Department, whose brief is to enhance co-ordination of children's and other early childhood services, would be the best way to progress these matters.

### Conclusion

- 2.33** Setting up a new Department will not solve all of the problems that currently beset services for children in New South Wales, many of which are not within the control of a single agency or level of government: child wellbeing is stubbornly linked to social and economic factors, and co-ordination issues between the Commonwealth and States have contributed to fragmentation in the early childhood sector.
- 2.34** We need a Minister and a new Department to champion health-promoting policies and highly regarded, evidence-based prevention strategies like *Families First*. This Minister and their Department will not work alone - children's health and learning are a collective responsibility. But they will lead the way in building a better system to nurture healthy, vibrant children, cohesive communities and a thriving economy.

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<sup>29</sup> *Budget Estimates, 2002-2003, Budget Paper No 3, Vol 1, p. 5-7*

<sup>30</sup> Young, M.E, op.cit., p.5

<sup>31</sup> Submission 155, NSW Children's Services Forum