

Closing Statement
The Honourable Judy Spence, MP, Minister for Families
Statement to CMC
Thursday, 23 October 2003

Thank you for this opportunity to address the commission again.

In the past eight days there have been a number of wide ranging claims made before this commission regarding the delivery of not only foster care services but the child protection system generally.

Some of those statements have been particularly disturbing. They have greatly concerned my colleagues and I.

And as the Premier made clear in his letter to you, this Government stands ready to do whatever is necessary to deal with any recommendations that flow from this inquiry.

The Premier and I are keen that, if possible, this Inquiry finds some way to report and make recommendations at least on some of the key issues you have dealt with as quickly as possible.

There should be no doubt as to the depth of our commitment to improving the lives of Queensland's children and young people. This inquiry is testament to that commitment.

There has been extensive media coverage of this hearing and as a result there are several points that need to be clarified.

Firstly, Mr Morgan asked me if I was concerned that a second case, called Ghost could have lay hidden without coming to the surface but for an independent audit.

I said: "I certainly am shocked and disappointed that that kind of case could still exist in the system despite the fact that directions have gone out, I think, from the Government and certainly from the Director-General about the need to look at case work. It is disappointing."

That was in reference to the discovery of a second case.

It has been reported that I was surprised at the extent of the problems facing this department.

In fact for two and a half years I have spoken publicly about the systemic issues challenging the child protection system.

That is why I built an aggressive and long term reform program.

Secondly, what has become lost is that the majority of decisions by the majority of Family Services Officers are good decisions with good outcomes for the children whose care they are considering.

These committed and dedicated people work in a complex environment that requires support and collaboration with professionals in a range of agencies across government and in the community.

Little has been said about successful intervention with positive outcomes.

One of the perhaps unintended consequences of this hearing is that foster carers feel they have been demonised when they are doing a difficult job which few people in society take on.

Again, I want to reinforce the fact that the vast majority of foster carers are good, hard working, decent people who are looking after some tough kids and delivering some outstanding outcomes.

Any reform process creates uncertainty. Observers should not confuse transformational processes such as reflection, learning and development with crisis.

It is my belief that the public examination of a wide range of issues at this inquiry, and the dialogue that it has generated within the community, is a healthy, valuable and positive one.

Fundamentally, what we have is a system under significant stress – facing escalating demand and finite resources – compounded by the range of historical factors.

These issues are not unique to this State. Recent reports in New South Wales, Victoria and other states have identified similar systemic issues.

We started reforming the system five years ago.

There can be arguments about speed, or about direction – but one thing has been clear and that is we recognised and implemented a determined reform agenda to improve the lives of Queensland's children and young people.

The system must continue to function while a series of immediate, short and long term reforms are implemented.

Anyone who has read some of the cases cannot help but be moved and saddened by the circumstances some of our children and young people find themselves in – for a wide range of reasons – drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, long term unemployment.

These all add to the stresses and strains on families. They are difficult to deal with and I do not underestimate the tough decisions or the emotional cost those decisions have on family services officers.

I am a parent and, like you, am distressed when I hear or read an allegation that one child has suffered.

I believe the average Queenslanders would be shocked to learn what some people are capable of and what our staff therefore have to deal with.

I frequently receive letters and complaints from members of the public, Members of Parliament, concerned parents who ask me to investigate or review decisions of the Department of Families.

The community expects us to get it right 100 per cent of the time.

Regrettably, that hasn't been the case. But it must be our goal.

The frontline workers are dealing with the consequences of behaviour that is often unpredictable, sometimes beyond any boundary of decency and always in a tough emotional environment.

If they intervene too early, they are criticised. If they remove a child, they are criticised. They are criticised for operating in a cloak of secrecy, but are criticised if they break confidentiality.

And the system's failures make front page headlines, but its successes do not.

It has been suggested that there is a culture of blame within this department.

I reject that. There is a significant difference between being responsible and accountable for a decision and mere finger pointing.

We have a well educated work force and I believe they accept the need to be accountable for their decisions – just as we, as a government, must deliver the training and support needed to help them do their jobs.

Reform is difficult. It requires overcoming the legacy of long-term under-resourcing and shifting the child protection system towards contemporary practice.

There has been significant progress in the past five years.

No one has suggested that we have reached the goal of a system capable of dealing with the multitude of issues being thrown up in the community.

I have always understood that overhauling the system would take an enormous amount of work. And we are determined to see that through.

In the past five years we have:

- Increased funding – we have doubled the Department of Families budget – doubled the amount we are now spending on child protection;
- almost doubled the number of family services offices and frontline staff;
- strengthened accountability, quality assurance and review mechanisms through audit and review teams;
- strengthened the SCAN teams and information sharing with other agencies;
- dramatically increased the level of investment in prevention and early intervention;
- introduced new training and staff development; and
- Planned the introduction of contemporary information systems.

I would also say that our data gathering has improved markedly and will continue to do so.

But as I said at the beginning of this inquiry, much more work needs to be done, and I won't be diverted from that.

Many times I have acknowledged the problems of the past. But I also think we need to move beyond that and focus on the future.

To that end, we are committed to:

- Reviewing recruitment strategies, payment and support structures offered to foster carers;
- Investigating alternative placement models of care for children whose needs cannot be met in foster care;
- reviewing the implementation and impact of the *Child Protection Act 1999*;
- monitoring the impact of the additional funding for staff training and development; and
- reviewing the career structure, training, development and support needs of staff working in child protection.

I also want to take this opportunity to release the government's response to the Ombudsman's report into the death of Baby Kate.

Most of the 29 recommendations have been implemented or are in the process of being implemented, while others are under consideration.

There are many lessons to be learnt from this tragedy and the Department of Families is working to address the systemic problems in the management of child protection cases, which the Ombudsman identified.

The results of David Bevan's investigation will guide us in refining the ongoing reform of the child protection system.

A number of recommendations relate directly to the issues being considered by this inquiry and have been addressed in the Government's submission.

The Government will review its response to the Ombudsman's report when the outcomes and recommendations of your inquiry are known.