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Queensland Inc.

Roundtables Report 2015

July 2015

Introduction to this report

In February 2015, PeakCare Queensland Inc. (PeakCare) commenced a series of roundtable meetings with Member Agencies and Supporters across the State. Following some disruption to the original itinerary resulting from Cyclone Marcia, the roundtables eventually concluded in April with seven meetings having been held on the following dates at the following locations - Eight Miles Plains (18th February), Nerang (24th February), Ipswich (25th February), Bundaberg (26th February), Kedron (31st March), Rockhampton (1st April) and Townsville (9th April) [1].

The roundtables were held to re-cap and reflect on child protection policy and service developments that have occurred over recent months and years and consider the question of where to from here. Semi-structured facilitated discussion focussed on three major areas – (1) progress achieved in implementing reforms associated with recommendations of the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (the Inquiry) and their impact to date, recommendations requiring prioritised attention and, with the benefit of hindsight, whether the Inquiry 'got it right or got it wrong', either totally or in part, and what may have been missing from its investigation and analysis; (2) effectiveness of the structures and processes set up to manage the governance of the reforms at State, regional and local levels, and (3) other emerging issues or heightened concerns about longstanding issues not examined by the Inquiry, but which nevertheless require attention.

This document reports on the discussions of those who attended the roundtables. In total, 28 Member Agencies were represented by participants from a diverse range of occupational groups and service 'types'. PeakCare also welcomed the participation of Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP) staff and Member Agency representatives in these discussions. The report also includes matters raised in emailed correspondence received from an additional PeakCare Member Agency that was unable to be

represented at a roundtable. Also included are the collective views of personnel from non-government organisations belonging to a network of Reconnect service providers. This network requested that outcomes of their discussion also be incorporated within this report.

In producing the report, no attempt has been made to validate (or otherwise) the views stated by the roundtable participants or to add PeakCare's own commentary in response to these views. Recognition should be given however to the moderating effect of the process used in debating opinions expressed during the meetings which, in most instances, resulted in a consensus view being formed. In respect of matters where differences in opinion were stated, these are noted within the report. Similarly, where some matters appeared to be of greater interest or concern to those who attended a particular roundtable meeting than others, this is also noted.

PeakCare regards this report as important in influencing our future work priorities and in informing our ongoing dialogue with the State Government and its agencies about the child protection reform agenda and its implementation. Very importantly, it is hoped that the report will serve as a useful catalyst for further discussion and debate amongst our Member Agencies, Supporters and other peak bodies and representative groups about the best ways forward in improving outcomes for Queensland children, young people and families. Accordingly, the report has been formatted to allow for further comments to be added and submitted to lwegener@peakcare.org.au. These may include comments from those who were unable to attend a roundtable as well as those who attended a meeting who have further information to add. In particular, you may like to comment on changes that have happened since the time of the roundtable you attended. Our appreciation is extended to all who contributed their practice experience and wisdom to the report's contents and we look forward to receiving any further comments you wish to make.

Lindsay Wegener
Executive Director
PeakCare Queensland Inc.

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[1] PeakCare extends our thanks to Key Assets, Anglicare Southern Queensland, IWC Limited, Rockhampton Family Relationship Centre (Centacare), Creche and Kindergarten Association and Act for Kids for providing venues to hold the roundtable meetings and to other Member Agencies for their kind offers of venues and assistance in promoting these events.

Post the Carmody Inquiry, how far have we come and where to from here?

Roundtable participants considered and discussed the following questions:

- From your perspective, what progress has been made in implementing the Inquiry recommendations? Do the steps that have been taken reflect the intentions of the Inquiry's recommendations?
- In relation to the changes that have occurred, what difference have they made to your organisation's delivery of services? What differences have they made to the children, young people, families and/or carers with whom you work?
- Did the Inquiry 'get it right' or 'get it wrong', either totally or in part? What may have been missing from its investigation and analysis?
- What are the priority areas we should now be focussing on?

The following identifies the major themes that emerged during the discussions and notes the points relevant to each theme.

Priorities and planning

Participants at each of the roundtable meetings generally concurred with the priority placed on investing in non-government delivered community-based intake, intensive family support, after care, and domestic and family violence services and regarded this investment as being sensible and 'in line' with the Inquiry findings and recommendations.

Concerns were expressed however about how these priorities were arrived at, their fit within an overarching plan reflective of the ten year 'roadmap' recommended by the Inquiry and how future priorities are being determined and communicated within and across government and non-government sectors.

Comments that were made relevant to this matter include:

- "There is no sense of a roadmap, where things are going and how we're getting there"
- "There seems to be a disconnect between 'business as usual' and designing and implementing the reforms" evidenced by "Child Safety Service Centres working as they did previously"

- "There is a sense that the Department is ticking boxes in response to some recommendations, rather than taking the time to think and consult widely about what will work where"
- Non-government organisations are making changes to ways in which they are delivering their services, not because of any consolidated across-sector plan for implementing the recommendations, but because they are "taking responsibility and implementing what they can" in the absence of a plan.

While acknowledging the value of investments made to date, some participants noted that they were "pleased to see the significant investment but feel that that there is no acknowledgment that funding cuts to some services are used to fund new initiatives". Most expressed concern that, "There has been no new investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations".

At one of the Brisbane roundtable meetings, a participant commented that, "There were announcements about increasing the number of Child Safety Officers to address backlogs and this appears to have happened in rural areas; backlogs in Brisbane have not however been addressed".

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Reviewing the *Child Protection Act 1999*

While acknowledging that Phase 1 of the legislative amendments has taken effect (for example, to consolidate mandatory reporting requirements), roundtable participants consistently called for more information about any plans which may be in place to conduct an "overdue review of the *Child Protection Act 1999*" and urged that this be undertaken "in consultation with peak bodies and non-government organisations".

In respect of the Phase 1 amendments, queries were raised by several participants about, "Where is the training for non-government organisations about the changes to mandatory reporting, referrals to services with or without a family's consent and information sharing?"

Concerns were expressed that there was "inconsistent understanding about the application of these amendments across the State when Family and Child Connect services are being progressively rolled out".

Office of the Public Guardian

Mixed views were reported by participants at each of the roundtables about how children, young people and carers were experiencing changes such as:

- Community Visitors no longer routinely visiting children in foster and kinship care

- introduction of Child Advocates, and

- establishment of the advocacy hubs.

Participants at the Rockhampton roundtable were generally of the view that "children in foster and kinship care who needed to be visited, are being visited", but some noted their suspicion that some carers may feel that they are "missing an advocate".

Townsville roundtable participants commented that "the location of the Townsville advocacy hub makes it difficult to get to".

At all meetings, most indicated that greater clarity is needed about the differences in the Community Visitor and Child Advocate roles. Some argued that "the recommendation/s about Community Visitors and Child Advocates were misunderstood and the positions did not need to be separate".

Across all roundtable meetings, participants noted that it would "be good to have some data or other evidence about how the roles are working" now that several months have passed since their creation.

Queensland Family and Child Commission

Across the State, the *Talking Families* campaign generally received positive feedback about the messages conveyed, its targeting and delivery as a public education strategy.

Uniformly, concern was expressed about delays in make permanent appointments to both Commissioner roles. Given that "a pressing and significant issue is the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system", participants concurred with the view expressed that it is "extremely disappointing that an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner has not yet been appointed" in either a temporary or permanent capacity.

Concerns were also expressed that the delay in permanently appointing the Commissioners appears to have subsequently delayed the establishment of an Advisory Committee which was flagged to be put in place in August 2014. It was argued that the delay in permanently appointing Commissioners and establishing the Advisory Committee "undermined the Commission's attention to its responsibilities and its ability to monitor the implementation of reforms" as intended by relevant recommendations of the Inquiry.

Reflecting on the range of responsibilities that were to be exercised by the Commission in relation to research, some participants queried, "Where is the research agenda?" These participants urged that the research agenda and priorities be developed with, and made known to, non-government organisations.

Supporting family reunification

Although not necessarily related to the response to the recommendation about reviewing the placements of particular cohorts of children in out-of-home care with a view to changing orders or facilitating reunification, there was a view widely expressed by participants that some reunifications of children with their families of origin were "rushed with little attention given to the nature and duration of post-reunification supports". One participant noted their concern in relation to an instance where children were being reunified with family members who had sexually abused them.

Several participants noted the emergence of a dynamic where some Child Safety Officers when challenged about decisions made to reunify children with their families, responded with statements similar to: 'This is what Carmody said should happen'. This was regarded as providing both an inadequate rationale for case decisions and not reflective of the actual intentions of the Inquiry's recommendations. Others noted that this was not typical of the actions of all Child Safety Officers.

There were concerns expressed that when the orders for some young people are revoked, these young people "transition to homelessness". These were concerns also stated by the network of Reconnect service providers along with a range of other specific issues concerning the inadequacy of service responses to the needs of young people.

Responding to the needs of young people

In reflecting concerns raised at a number of the roundtables that the Inquiry did not pay enough attention to the specific needs of young people (as opposed to younger children), issues of concern raised by Reconnect service providers included:

- premature case closures by Child Safety Service Centres in respect of young people often aged around 12 years or older where risk factors to their safety have not been adequately addressed

- the prevalence of domestic and family violence as a major contributing factor to young people leaving home with young women being especially regarded as at significant risk and some services noting that domestic and family violence is a factor relevant to most young people with whom they are currently working

- the vulnerability of young people, especially those aged under 16 years, to sexual and financial exploitation

- the increasing number of instances where young people who have either exited care or who are known to the Department but not 'in care' and who are homeless, are taking up accommodation options advertised on the internet that are often older males seeking to sexually exploit young women as 'tenants'

- difficulties experienced in negotiating agreements with parents who are often living in poverty, to transfer the family tax benefits they receive to the families of friends upon whom young people are often reliant for accommodation and who are also dependant on the financial assistance provided by this benefit to sustain these arrangements

- safety concerns sometimes experienced for staff from non-government organisations when contacting parents of young people they are supporting

- concerns about a lack of clarity in respect of obligations about the maintenance of client confidentiality

- difficulties often experienced when adults acting in the role of 'pseudo-guardians' of young people not 'in care' accessing family tax benefits, but not passing on these benefits to the young people or not making use of them to meet their primary care needs

- difficulties experienced in linking young people with Child Safety Service Centres if the young people are not attending school

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- ad hoc arrangements resulting in inconsistent practice by Child Safety Service Centres in approving 'special payments' to maintain 'informal' care arrangements, with some young people benefitting from these arrangements and some 'missing out'

- inconsistent advocacy on behalf of young people – 15 year old young people especially - that allows some to access 'special benefits' from Centrelink, while others 'miss out' due to this age group generally being regarded as ineligible to receive a benefit and the subsequent 'tension' this causes when young people who have been dealt with differently by Centrelink are co-located within the same service

- an overall lack of suitable accommodation options for young people when home is not safe, with shelters often refusing to accommodate young people aged less than 16 years, and even where they do, the shelter accommodation often being an unsuitable option

- the overall lack of suitable accommodation options leading to some services needing to either arrange for their accommodation in caravan parks or supply them with tents

- the incongruence of Child Safety Service Centres seeming to view young people in care aged 13 or 14 years as 'old enough' to 'self-place' with Centrelink policy deeming them 'not old enough' to receive a benefit

- a lack of adequate protocols between the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services and Centrelink, and

- an apparent perception held by many Child Safety Service Centres that the involvement of a non-government organisation providing reconnect services is sufficient to meet obligations to 'protect' a young person even when limited funded capacity exists to deliver the level of support needed to do so adequately.

New framework for child protection practice

The level of awareness held by roundtable participants about the new framework for child protection practice varied considerably depending on whether or not they had been able to avail themselves of an opportunity to attend a workshop about the framework.

Those who were familiar with the framework were generally positive. Many participants, especially those who attended the Rockhampton roundtable, considered the framework "as a challenge to departmental officers, but not so to non-government organisations as they are already using such approaches".

Participants at all roundtables expressed concerns about mixed messages being received from departmental officers with some conveying that the framework had been developed for use by the government sector only (i.e. by Child Safety Officers), while others described the framework as having been developed for application across both the government and non-government sectors.

These participants called for greater clarity about this matter and discussions to be entered into with the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services to develop a "shared understanding about which and how non-government services will be impacted by the framework".

Transfer of case management from the statutory agency to non-government service providers

Many roundtable participants raised queries about actions being taken to consider and progress the Inquiry recommendation about the transfer of case management responsibilities to non-government service providers. Most supported this recommendation in principle.

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In particular, those involved in providing out-of-home care services perceived the transfer of case management responsibilities as a means of reducing cumbersome processes currently in place to obtain guardianship consents for children's participation in a range of activities and being able to provide more timely responses to matters where consent is required. Advantages were also identified in services that have the best knowledge of a child being able to lead the development and implementation of a 'single case plan' and coordinate the delivery of services in accordance with this plan.

Many participants at each of the roundtables also stated matters that would need to be carefully considered and addressed prior to a transfer of these responsibilities to the non-government sector. These matters included:

- a definition of 'case management' being developed that clearly defines respective roles and the extent of responsibilities that would be retained by the statutory agency and those that would be 'out-sourced' to non-government service providers, and under what circumstances and at what points of a child's or family's involvement with the child protection system that the transfer of these responsibilities would occur, and

- subject to the above definition being developed, the identification of resource implications for non-government organisations in acquiring these additional responsibilities and the subsequent transfer of these resources from the government to the non-government sector.

Participants considered that some non-government organisations, especially those whose services incorporate the administration of a casework function in supporting the care and/or support of children and their families, were already well-placed to assume the exercise of case management responsibilities. They noted however that this was not the case in respect of others. This included, in particular, providers of foster and kinship care services where their delivery of services was confined to the recruitment, training and support of carers and there is an absence of a casework function attached to these organisations in working with children and their families. It was argued that taking on a case management role would entail a "significant change in the design and delivery of these services and the amount of funding they receive".

Wide regional and local variations were also reported in respect of the extent to which residential care service providers are engaged in working with the families of children in their care, with some participants noting that Departmental officers clearly see it as their role, and not that of the residential care service, to perform all casework undertaken with parents and family members as part of their case management role.

The Eight Miles Plains roundtable participants noted that the transfer of case management responsibilities could most viably be undertaken when there is confidence that permanence has been achieved in securing a child's care arrangements. In relation to other children, some participants noted the potential for the emergence of 'disincentives' to facilitate safe reunification of children with their families or their transition to other suitable care arrangements if this entails a reduction in the funding being received by the organisation holding case management responsibility or a perception being formed that the organisation is not meeting its required level of 'service outputs' in terms of 'filled bed numbers'. Further discussion took place about shifts that may need to be further explored and implemented to:

- re-vamp current 'siloed funding arrangements' to enable better management of children's transitions between various out-of-home care arrangements and in-home support

- establish 'incentives' (or at the least remove disincentives) for out-of-home care providers to support and facilitate, through their case management, safe reunifications of children with their families or their transition to less costly and more suitable care arrangements, along with

"safeguards to ensure that case decision-making is not compromised by these incentives" with one participant recommending further consideration be given to 'social benefit bond' approaches as an option for bringing this into effect, and

- support the development and maintenance of strong collaborative partnerships and case work across service 'types' and organisations at regional and local levels as a necessary foundation for successful administration of a case management role.

Townsville roundtable participants commented that unless a concerted effort was made to increase the number of non-government sector staff with appropriate professional qualifications and experience that "the transfer of case management to non-government organisations will be problematic".

Representatives from both community-controlled and non-Indigenous service providers at most roundtables noted specific concerns in relation to the transfer of case management in respect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These concerns related to the large number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living with non-Indigenous foster carers and in residential care administered by non-Indigenous organisations and staffed predominantly by non-Indigenous residential care workers. The concern was that a transfer of case management to non-government organisations administering these services would "further entrench children in placements that do not comply with the Placement Principle". It was argued that case management in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children must only be transferred to community-controlled organisations as these are the best placed to ensure the maintenance and/ or restoration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's connections with family, community, culture and country.

Assessment of children's needs (moderate, high, complex, extreme), the funding of placements and prospect of 'professional foster care'

A query was raised at the Eight Miles Plains roundtable about "the fate of the recommendation about aligning the level of a child's needs and their placement setting". Concerns were expressed about current practices where foster and kinship carers receive a fortnightly allowance commensurate with caring for children who have allegedly 'moderate' needs, rather than a more realistic 'high' level of needs. Carers attached to intensive foster care services are seen to be often caring for children with a similar level of need but receive a higher fortnightly allowance and additional supports.

Several participants at a number of roundtable meetings commented on "inconsistent decision making by different Child Safety Service Centres around High and Complex Support Needs Allowances" and concerns were raised about the "disincentive effect on carers continuing to foster when, after achieving good outcomes for a child, their allowance is discontinued". A Rockhampton roundtable participant described a scenario where the cessation of financial support for a child with complex needs to attend day care placed "unreasonable pressure on the carer".

An argument was also put forward for a return to former practices where organisations providing intensive foster care services administer the payments to their carers. It was noted that since the transfer of this task to the Department, "payments are not always received or received at the right level of payment" which requires non-government organisations to engage in costly and time-consuming liaison with the Department to ensure that "carers receive timely and accurate payments".

More flexibility and access to additional financial and other resources for foster and kinship carers were advocated. Some participants claimed that the "level of fostering allowance paid to carers in Queensland is much lower than in other Australian jurisdictions where the 'true cost' of caring for foster children has been increasingly recognised and funded".

Some participants noted that the delineation between general foster care and intensive foster care has become blurred and queries were raised about any progress achieved in responding to the Inquiry recommendation about the possible introduction of 'professional foster care' as a means of re-capturing the integrity of 'treatment foster care' models. The development of professional foster care was also seen by some as reducing inappropriate use of residential care as a 'default option' in the absence of a suitable family-based care model that would be preferable for some children.

Rockhampton roundtable participants noted that all carers within this area of the State have now been "transferred from the Department to non-government organisations" and commented that many of these carers, due to the apparent lesser levels of support they previously received, can be "very resistant" to receiving regular home visits and meeting mandatory training obligations.

Organisational and staffing arrangements within the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services

Rockhampton roundtable participants observed that the turnover of Child Safety Service Centre staff was high due to the number of acting in higher duty arrangements and staff being taken off-line to undertake project work. It was argued that this presented difficulties for non-government service providers in their liaison with the Department and was viewed as "incongruent with the spirit of Carmody reforms".

Townsville roundtable participants commented that the "specialised Connecting Young People Team in the Townsville area works really well" with case management being exercised by one Child Safety Service Centre Team Leader in preference to previous arrangements that required non-government service providers to deal with three separate Child Safety Service Centres. They also noted however that other specialist teams in North Queensland had been disbanded.

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Your comments

Both those who attended a roundtable and those who were unable to are invited to add comments. These may be about matters discussed in this section of the report that you agree with or about which you hold a different view. You may like to again refer to the questions listed at the beginning of this section of the report and comment about other issues you think are of importance to consider concerning the progress of implementing reforms associated with the Carmody Inquiry and the question of where to from here. Those who attended a roundtable meeting may wish to comment on changes that have occurred since that time.

Re: Priorities and planning

Re: Reviewing the Child Protection Act 1999

Re: Office of the Public Guardian

Re: Supporting family reunification

Re: Responding to the needs of young people

Re: New framework for child protection practice

Re: Transfer of case management from the statutory agency to non-government service-providers

Re: Assessment of children's needs (moderate, high, complex, extreme), the funding of placements and prospect of 'professional foster care'

Re: Organisational and staffing arrangements within the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services

Re: Other issues

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Your participation in the planning and process of reform

Roundtable participants considered and discussed the following questions:

- What are the arrangements currently in place for your participation in the planning and implementation of reforms?
- How have you and/or other representatives of your organisation been involved in regional deliberations, strategies and placed-based planning?
- What is working well, in what ways could it be improved and why?

The following identifies the major themes that emerged during the discussions and notes points relevant to each theme.

Structural governance arrangements to guide and manage the reforms

The majority of participants at each of the roundtables rated themselves as having a low level of awareness of the forums responsible for the governance of the reforms and had received little advice about this apart from information provided by PeakCare via videos and other publications. In particular, many stated that the "information that is missing is about ways in which these forums link with regional and local services".

At most meetings, participants stated that, apart from some initial information received from Regional Offices of the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services about the formation of regional governance groups (referred to by most as the Child and Family Committees), little or no information was being received about the membership of these groups or their activities.

Relevant comments that were made include:

- "We have little or no knowledge about local arrangements for the Child and Family Committees"
- "We would appreciate timely information about what's going on, progress and how to be involved"
- "Not convinced that the sectors that need to be joined up are joining up, for example, drug and alcohol, domestic and family violence, police, mental health, etc"

- "There is a need for better collaboration across Queensland Government agencies around the same reforms"
- "There appears to be a disconnect between what happens or is expected by 'central office' and regional arms of government"
- "Concerned that place-based planning is inhibited by the absence of all NGOs at the Child and Family Committee tables".

It is noteworthy that from the time of the roundtables commencing in February to their conclusion in April, the proportion of those in attendance who were aware and made use of the *Stronger Families* website (https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/gateway/stronger-families) increased significantly. Those who were familiar with the website commented that it served a useful purpose in communicating up-to-date information.

Local Level Alliances

In relation to the formation of Local Level Alliances (LLAs), there was an acknowledgement made by participants at most roundtable meetings that it was "early days". In areas where Family and Child Connect had been established, there was a higher level of familiarity with LLAs. Nevertheless, most participants stated that they remained unclear about the purpose of the LLAs and subsequently, their membership.

Roundtable participants in other areas of the State commented that it would be useful to receive more information about the "lessons being learned" so that "mistakes could be avoided".

Some participants in the Eight Mile Plains roundtable meeting were able to describe:

- arrangements that had been put in place by QCOSS and the Department within the Brisbane region to form three geographically based planning groups (possibly the precursor to a LLA)

- use of these groups in planning for the disbursement of Family and Child Connect and Intensive Family Support service funding, and

- advice being given to prospective tenderers to participate in a group in order to receive the information needed to apply for funding when it is advertised.

Ipswich roundtable participants described the LLA processes as "clunky" at this stage and in need of "streamlining" to better enable "effective work across the system". A participant at this meeting also raised a query about what forum and/or process might be appropriately accessed to "sort out boundary issues" that seem to be preventing Family and Child Connect services from "talking to each other and sharing information". This was perceived as problematic when families move from one area to another which requires the "process to start all over again" even when many of the same agencies remain involved with the family.

Participants at a number of roundtables raised queries about whether similar alliances should be established for providers of out-of-home care services building on established networks of these services where they exist. Some noted that links should also be established between the LLAs and out-of-home care networks to facilitate improved integration of in-home and out-of-home care services and, in particular, support the reunification of children with their families. Ipswich roundtable participants described a trend for providers of foster and kinship

care services as well as residential care to become "siloed with little information being shared with and across organisations".

Other relevant comments made by participants include:

- "There are difficulties and tension when the formation of a LLA runs across a pre-existing well-functioning similar alliance of services"

- "Minutes of LLAs should be shared"

- "Who is connecting the dots across Queensland with the LLAs?"

- There is a "lack of understanding about the level to which LLAs should be similar across the state and where there is room for difference"

- "Some agencies that should be engaged are not being engaged in the LLA".

General observations and comments about communication and engagement

At all roundtables, participants recognised the complexities involved in establishing and maintaining effective communication and engagement strategies across government and non-government sectors at State, regional and local levels. Factors that were identified as contributing to this complexity include:

- the tension that often exists in striking the right balance between ensuring, on the one hand, program integrity state-wide that addresses the Inquiry recommendations and conforms with 'central' policy directions as they emerge, and on the other hand, regional and local autonomy and responsive to community demographics, needs and trends

- the challenges presented by Queensland's geography in defining 'communities' with a self-identified commonality of interest for purposes of engaging in place-based planning, while also recognising and catering for the vast differences

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that exist between the south-east corner of the State and regional and remote areas in this regard

- the broad scope of the reforms with some non-government organisations (as well as government agencies) having a higher level of involvement and interest in some aspects of the reforms than others, notwithstanding that all are linked to a greater or lesser extent

- the large number and diversity of non-government organisations in relation to their size, the range and focus of the services they provide, their organisational structures and location of their infrastructure, and the impact of these factors on their capacity to participate in various forums at State, regional and/or local levels, and

- the existence (or lack of) designated roles within both government and non-government organisations to serve as effective 'conduits' in managing the exchange of information within and across both sectors at State, regional and local levels and coordinate the use of feedback loops to ensure that various planning forums are both informing and being informed by each other's priorities and activities.

Comments made by roundtable participants include:

- "Communication by the Department could be targeted to better meet the information and other requirements of organisations that operate State-wide or in more than one region. This would assist in avoiding duplication and inconsistency in the information being received from regional offices and assist in pitching the information at the right level within organisations (for example, organisational executives, service managers, practitioners)"

- "It is resource-intensive for organisations that operate across regions to participate in the same meeting in different locations. There is a fear however that a meeting that is not attended could be the one where vital information is shared or provided"

- "It is frequently occurring that we are expected to participate in a meeting of service providers within one region, often about the development of a set of operational procedures, and then get invited to a similar meeting in one or more other regions for the same reason, the result being that we are then expected to implement different sets of procedures to meet the different requirements of each region".

These were issues of concern stated most strongly by participants in the roundtables held in the south-east corner of the State (i.e. Nerang, Ipswich, Eight Mile Plains and Kedron) but not confined to these meetings.

Participants in the roundtable meetings held in central and northern Queensland (i.e. Bundaberg, Rockhampton and Townsville) tended to more strongly identify issues of concern about the extent to which their local knowledge of the communities in which they were delivering services was being drawn upon to inform place-based service mapping and planning.

Participants in the Bundaberg roundtable meeting, for example, elected as a group to author their own list of concerns that reflected this theme. They wrote:

- *There is a lack of liaison between government departments (including child safety) and NGOs at the coal face*

- *There is a lack of consultation with regional services. The current process of reform is too 'top down' and needs to be turned upside down.*

- *There are too many committees conducted in siloes with no regional voice and not enough outcomes being produced.*

- *There are unreasonable expectations held by the Department for NGOs to service very large catchment areas with insufficient funding and a lack of respect given to community developed projects developed by NGOs that are unfunded.*

- *The Department must communicate better with kids and families before decisions are made that affect their lives.*

- *We need to be able to profit from efficient and innovative practice. Business becomes insolvent without profit.*

Participants at all roundtable meetings commented on the need to improve "clarity about the purpose, parameters and focus of meetings of government and non-government service delivery partners so that non-government agencies can make sure the right people are at the table". Many commented that it was important to be "clear whether the purpose is information sharing or a consultative process".

Others also commented on the advantages of building on existing networks and forums. Ipswich roundtable participants noted, for example, a "full day quarterly community services forum held in the region that could be expanded to provide opportunities to share information, identify trends, do service mapping and assist with some of the reform processes".

Nerang roundtable participants commented that it was often easier for small organisations (such as a neighbourhood centre) to contribute to localised place-based planning due to their intimate knowledge of their local community, but were often over-looked or less able to participate in policy or service development at broader State-wide or regional levels. Participants in all roundtables commented that, in many instances, it was often the opposite case for large organisations. Many observed that this was often dependent upon organisational structures and the extent to which individual organisations were 'centralised' or 'regionalised'.

It was observed that In the case of the former, these organisations were often "spread thin" in the attempts made by a small number of Brisbane-based personnel to attend large numbers of regional forums. Some participants, especially those who attended roundtables held in central and northern Queensland noted that where the focus of a meeting or forum is on 'place-based planning', these persons are often not the best-placed in being able to contribute local knowledge and participate in the formation of collaborative local networks. Conversely, there was an acknowledgement of the advantages presented by centralised pooling of human resources in achieving administrative efficiencies, developing and maintaining high levels of research, policy, program and practice expertise and capacity to influence the reform agenda at a State-wide level.

Where larger organisations had more devolved regional or local management structures, it was thought that they were often better able to send the 'right people to the table' with the appropriate level of authority to represent their organisations in relation to place-based planning, but this sometimes came at a cost of a reduced 'central office capacity'.

Those who were employed by mid-sized organisations concluded that they were often 'caught somewhere in between' with some of the advantages held by small organisations in being strongly aware of the communities in which they are located, but with their capacity to participate in consultation and planning forums and processes often limited by their low level of resourcing.

In exploring these issues, participants at all roundtable meetings reached some conclusions about:

- the "importance of the Department acknowledging that facilitating and participating in regional, local area, and sector-specific networks is an integral part of service delivery"

- the "need for the non-government sector to be provided additional resources to assist their participation in the planning and implementation of reforms in a similar manner to the additional resources that appear to have been added to the Department in central and regional offices" with a recommendation made by Rockhampton roundtable participants that a position be specifically funded, possibly auspiced and out-posted by PeakCare, "to drive local place-based

partnerships within central Queensland and ensure that networking is purposeful"

- "NGOs have a responsibility in co-design, keeping local level planning alive and asserting NGO involvement and wanting to know what's going on"

- "NGOs need to be more proactive in seeking dialogue with the Department about what will work best for them and be pragmatic about

negotiating the best solutions, rather than expecting that these are problems that will be solved for them"

- "NGOs may need to reflect on their own organisational structures and consider changes they may need to make to ensure they are able to have the right people at the table to contribute to place-based planning".

Your comments

You are invited to add your comments. These may be about matters discussed in this section of the report that you agree with or about which you hold a different view. You may like to again refer to the questions listed at the beginning of this section of the report and comment about other issues you think are of importance to consider in relation to your organisation's participation in the planning and process of reform. Those who attended a roundtable may wish to comment on changes that have taken place since that time.

Re: Structural governance arrangements to guide and manage the reforms

Re: Local Level Alliances

Re: General observations and comments about communication and engagement

Re: Other issues

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Other new or emerging issues

Roundtable participants considered and discussed the following questions:

- Are there new or emerging issues of concern to your organisation and/or the children, young people and/or families who are the recipients of your organisation's services, that need to be attended to?

- Is there an increasing concern about some longstanding issues? What are these issues and why are there heightened concerns?

It was noted that these may be issues that were not examined by the Inquiry and/ or were not made the subject of any Inquiry recommendations.

The following lists the issues that were identified.

Disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

- "Disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in the child protection system continues and is increasing. Past inquiries failed to make recommendations about how to address the issues. Failure to appoint the Commissioner positions within the Family and Child Commission and establish advisory committees means that there is no oversight of the intention of the reforms."

- "Partnerships between mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services must be based on shared values and respect for self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families."

Child Protection Guide

- Concerns were stated that "anyone" can use the Child Protection Guide and that it is manipulable. The integrity of the Guide needs to be assured.

Procurement processes

- Concerns were raised about the "unnecessarily and increasingly competitive and secretive approach that accompanies funding processes", rather than achieving "a balance with collaboration through openness and local level planning".

- Concerns were stated that "service models as they are described within funding information papers are very prescriptive" and this is perceived as "making it difficult to partner with organisations to develop creative, place-based proposals".

- Comments were made that non-Indigenous service providers sometimes felt "compelled" by Department officers and/or senior management of their own organisations to submit tenders to deliver services targeted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families when they believed they were not the best-placed service in terms of their cultural proficiency to do so and were sometimes contrary to the terms of local partnership agreements with community-controlled organisations.

- "Longer lead times are required when tenders are advertised to explore and arrange partnership and consortia arrangements."

- "Seeking feedback from prospective tenderers about draft tender documents occurs in the ACT. Could this happen here?"

- "Contestability does not enable sector capacity building (at a system level) in regional communities".

- Rather than "shopping for alliances" and the department's seeming preference for contracting with a single organisation, a "range of options and contractual arrangements is needed".

- "The financial and time cost of preparing submissions is very high."

- The announcements about the awarding of after care and domestic and family violence services funding was "protracted and laboured".

Ongoing contractual arrangements – the relationship between the Department and non-government partners

- The attitude of "We fund you, so...." demonstrated by some Departmental officers must be replaced in regional communities with an approach that is more about being "all in this together".

- Because services "cannot accrue a surplus of more than 1/12 of the annual level of funding assessed across each quarter, it is impossible for organisations to be creative or innovative in their approaches to investing - this does not happen in other jurisdictions".

- "Although the concept of social benefit bonds was rejected by the previous Queensland Government, there is merit in re-considering this approach to investing in non-government service delivery."

- An example was described of local non-government organisations and Child Safety Service Centres being prepared to come together to have the "uncomfortable conversations" with the outcome being "improved relationships that are mutually satisfying".

- "Counting outputs is problematic as valid activities (such as network meetings) or enabling processes (such as travel) are not eligible for counting."

- The change from 'community support / resourcing' to 'contract management' was a significant change for non-government service providers and it was viewed that "the Department lost a lot of skilled and experienced staff as a result of this change".

- "Organisations are being offered contracts for one year, when they were previously on triennial agreements, which creates uncertainty."

- "Organisations want certainty in their funding arrangements as uncertainty impacts adversely on staff retention, staff motivation, service quality and the availability of services."

- "The withdrawal of Federal government funding or the renewal of funding for only months at a time is creating financial viability issues for organisations and staffing difficulties that also impact our ability to deliver State-funded services."

Program design and implementation

- The evidence base for a program and the program logic should be "stated more explicitly in tender specifications". The program evaluation should seek to "test and/or build the evidence base".

- "The Department's investment in evaluation should take effect from program commencement."

- "Program guidelines should be adhered to, especially if based in research and evidence." Examples were given of program models, guidelines and protocols being "thrown out the window" by the Department and these services being used as "just another placement resource".

- "Services are told to change the target group for a service, for example, from generic family support to working with high risk families with limited or no discussion or negotiation about these changes."

- A view was stated that organisations are expected to "respond to what the Queensland Government wants to purchase rather than respond to local needs".

- "Longer term service agreements are needed."

- "The blind spots where there are no services need to be addressed as a high priority."

Findings and recommendations from the Senate inquiry into out-of-home care (due mid 2015) and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (final report due 31 December 2015)

- A number of participants noted that "significant and/or additional attention to regulatory frameworks and standards is very likely to occur as a result of these inquiries", and it "should be anticipated that there will be accompanying resource implications".

- Some anticipated that they may also result in "increased use of national approaches" which may also have resource implications for non-government organisations.

Interface between education/schools and child protection

- "The simple focus on children's attendance at school in remote communities should be complemented by a focus on young peoples' retention to meet compulsory participation requirements in the senior phase of learning."

- "Education decision-makers should recognise that suspending a child from school impacts on the child's social connections."

- "The high number of children in care on 'managed attendance' is a major concern."

- Rockhampton roundtable participants stated that education support plans are inadequate. "Calmer Classrooms does not seem to have been implemented satisfactorily as the impacts of trauma do not seem to be understood, nor adequately or consistently supported."

- Rockhampton roundtable participants considered the location of police liaison officers in schools a "disproportionate reaction to managing behaviours".

- Ipswich roundtable participants identified the need for better "co-ordinated responses by education and child safety departments to promote children's school attendance" and a need to establish "more programs (similar to the service provide by OzCare in Goodna) that locate family support services within schools and integrate responses to assist students with their education and address family and social issues".

Domestic and family violence

- "The number of families experiencing domestic and family and level of violence is spiking."

- Police do "not engage a language interpreter straightaway" in instances when they should be.

- "Women continue to be left vulnerable" in areas of the State where "no improvements have been made to the Police response" – in these areas, "police are not applying for protection orders particularly for women from non-English speaking backgrounds, children are not included on applications/orders, and there are inconsistencies" in the responses that are being provided.

- "When parents, usually fathers, murder their children, this is not named as domestic violence."

- "More work needs to be done with men and with young people to prevent domestic and family violence."

- "Women from non-English speaking backgrounds are becoming increasingly vulnerable to being exploited and taken advantage of."

- One participant described her disappointment "to see the continuing loss of a gendered analysis towards sexual, and more particularly domestic and family violence, as a norm in organisations".

Specialist substance rehabilitation, mental health and disability services for children and young people

- There are "insufficient substance rehabilitation and mental health services for children and young people".

- "Access to Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs (ATOD) services is not timely (i.e have to wait for next intake start date) by which time a young person's motivation is lost."

- "Substance rehabilitation services for young people are often limited to 10 days, and young people cycle through before any benefits can be achieved."

- "There is a lack of specialist disability services for children."

Prescription of psychotropic medication for children and young people

- Research is needed to explore "why there is a much higher use of prescribed psychotropic medications by children from Queensland than those living in other States and Territories".

- Family support providers and early education providers noted a significant "increase in the number of very young children being prescribed these medications" and queried whether they are being "over-prescribed".

- Concern was stated about "pressure that is sometimes placed on parents to ensure that their child is medicated if an ADHD or similar diagnosis has been made before the school will accept their enrolment".

- Some speculated that "general practitioners may be feeling compelled to make a diagnosis of ADHD and prescribe medication in order to ensure that the child remains eligible to receive 'teacher aide hours' and access to other resources within their school".

- Out-of-home care providers noted high numbers of children and young people being referred who are on a "cocktail of medications" in addition to using illegal substances.

- Out-of-home care providers reported concerns about whether "appropriate levels of information and instruction are being provided to foster and kinship carers and residential care workers" about their issuing of these medications to avoid errors being made and to ensure adequate monitoring of their administration and use.

Use of 'ice'

- Anecdotal evidence was given about increased access to and use of ice by children, young people, young parents, and parents generally and the "devastating impact on families and community functioning".

- Roundtable participants reported that the impact appears to vary for different cohorts and is "more prevalent in some geographic areas than others".

- Both family support and out-of-home care providers reported pressure being placed on their services to develop "new knowledge and skills" and/or access to "specialist services" that will better equip them to work with children, young people and/or families where the use of ice is an issue of concern.

- An Eight Miles Plains roundtable participant whose organisation delivers services in north Queensland noted her observation that "unwritten rules about not using children to deal" in the sale of illegal substances are not being observed in relation to the distribution of ice and this is causing additional problems in some communities.

Self-harming behaviours and suicidality

- Observations were reported about increases in the number of incidents of "self-harm by younger children".

- Particular concerns were noted about the "high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children demonstrating suicidal ideation and/or engaged in self-harming behaviours". The extent to which these children (especially very young children) were engaged in chroming was also noted as concerning.

- The ability to "access Child and Youth Mental Health Services only via a hospital referral" was reported as problematic.

Early childhood education and care

- It was reported that "little if any attention is given to early childhood education and care and its interface with family support and child protection".

- It was argued that the management of this interface requires "added focus and more attention" at State-wide, regional and local levels.

Working with Children Checks

- A specific concern was raised at the Eight Miles Plains roundtable about the requirement that young people who turn 18 years of age and have the opportunity to remain in the same placement must obtain a Blue Card if there are children in care living in the same premises. It was argued that "this requirement is unreasonable", as can be the interpretation placed on the relevance of a young person's criminal charges or convictions. The anticipated or actual refusal of a positive notice was also described as "stressful" and can be "devastating for the young person and other children in the placement". This issue was regarded as a posing a "challenge for the 'It's Ok to Stay' campaign".

- The problems being experienced by people living in remote communities getting a Blue Card were reported as a longstanding and ongoing issue of concern. Examples were given about applications by prospective kinship carers "getting through the Department's central screening unit" and the working with children check being refused by the Public Safety Business Agency, usually due to historic concerns, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants.

- Getting a Blue Card was also reported as an issue for children (i.e. prior to turning 18 years) who want to work in child related employment and have charges or convictions that are considered negatively in the determination of an application. Specific problems were reported in relation to young people who are charged with 'sexting' or with having pornography and later apply for a Blue Card.

- Related to this concern, some participants advocated that there was a "need for community education and different justice approaches in responding to sexting" in recognition that the young people who engage in sexting are often "highly vulnerable and looking for social connection and are unaware of the long term consequences".

Kinship care

- A concern was raised that training not being a mandatory requirement for kinship carers contributes to a perception that kinship care is "not at the same level as foster care".

- It was argued that the evidence base and regulatory framework for kinship care should be subject to review in a manner that recognises the distinct differences between kinship care and foster care and does not diminish its value or importance by viewing it as a "lesser level or form of foster care".

Carer assessments

- Participants in some roundtable meetings noted that "the threshold for re-approval of carers appears to have increased" in respect to training requirements and assessments, possibly linked to Standard of Care Incidents and the Department's "unrealistic expectation that all eventualities can be foreseen through I & A type assessments".

- Some raised concerns that "the Department is expecting non-government foster and kinship care service providers to purchase external assessments by qualified assessors" in respect of all carer applications, which is not possible within the level of funding provided to services and undermines the capacity of these services to "develop their relationship" with prospective carers during the assessment process.

- Participants in roundtables held in central and northern Queensland reported "bottlenecks" in the processes used by the Department in considering new carer applications and delays of several months in obtaining their approvals, which impacts on the capacity of organisations to place children in home-based care and also meet their performance targets.

Inappropriate referrals and poor matching

- Participants in most roundtable meetings described concerns about the extent to which inappropriate referrals are being made to out-of-home care services and "little or no attention being given to matching".

- Specific concerns were raised about the number of children with highly sexualised behaviours being placed with other children and causing risks to their safety and the number of children who have been sexually harmed being placed with carers with "no therapeutic support being made available".

Residential care

- Participants at various roundtables who are involved in delivering residential care services commented that, despite the existence of contractual agreements with the Department stating that their services are to be targeted to children ages 12 to 17 years, they are "in reality expected to also accept referrals for much younger children".

- Concerns were raised that when these younger children are placed in these residentials, "their needs are not met as the 'Youth Workers' (with an emphasis placed on 'Youth') are "not qualified or trained to address younger children's developmental and therapeutic needs", and the children are "exposed to inconsistent figures through rostered staffing arrangements, which impacts adversely on attachment development".

- Some also noted that their residential services are receiving an "increasing number of referrals for placement of pregnant young women" in respect of whom they are also ill-equipped and "not set up to provide suitable care". Central Queensland participants noted the need for a specific-purpose service to care for young mothers and their babies.

Adequacy of out-of-home care service models

- Participants in most roundtables raised concerns that the range of out-of-home care options is "rigid and inadequate".

- Room was identified for the "upskilling of youth workers to meet the needs of young people who are self-placing and moving between placements including periodic stays in youth detention centres".

- Concerns were expressed about "the number of siblings who are being separated in placements" and the need to develop more service models to "avoid making inappropriate use of residential care services" that have not been specifically designed or staffed for this purpose.

- Non-Indigenous providers of foster and kinship care services expressed concerns about the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being referred for placement with non-Indigenous carers and the resulting impact on these children "losing their sense of culture".

Poverty

- Participants raised concerns about the impact of poverty and noted that "poor people continue to be disproportionately represented" in service systems as a result of this impact.

Transport

- Townsville roundtable participants noted that transport remained an issue of concern in North Queensland in that inadequate access to affordable transport "isolates families" and creates difficulties for organisations in "delivering services" to them.

Your comments

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Re: Disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

Re: Child Protection Guide

Re: Procurement processes

Re: Ongoing contractual arrangements – the relationship between the Department and non-government partners

Re: Program design and implementation

Re: Findings and recommendations from the Senate Inquiry into out of home care (due mid 2015) and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (final report due 31 December 2015)

Re: Interface between education/ schools and child protection

Re: Domestic and family violence

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Re: Specialist substance rehabilitation, mental health and disability services for children and young people

Re: Prescription of psychotropic medication for children and young people

Re: Use of 'ice'

Re: Self-harming behaviours and suicidality

Re: Early childhood education and care

Re: Working with Children Checks

Re: Kinship care

Re: Carer assessments

Re: Inappropriate referrals and poor matching

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Re: Residential care
Re: Adequacy of out-of-home care models
Re: Poverty
Re: Transport
Re: Other new or emerging issues

If you have entered comments, please email a copy to lwegener@peakcare.org by Tuesday 28th July 2015

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