



Minister for Child Safety, Youth and Women
Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence

Our reference: CSYW 07170-2019

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Mr Neil Laurie
Clerk of Parliament
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Dear Mr Laurie

I refer to Petition 3175-19 tabled in the Legislative Assembly on 15 October 2019, regarding an inquiry into the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women.

The Queensland Government is committed to helping Queensland families, children and young people, particularly those experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage, to flourish and excel in their lives. A key part of this commitment is our collective work through the Supporting Families Changing Futures reforms. In 2019, we have reached the halfway point in this 10-year program, which is focussed on delivering the right services at the right time to support families and keep children safe.

We are determined to see this ambitious plan implemented. On 25 July 2019, I was pleased to release *Supporting Families Changing Futures 2019-2023, the Queensland Government's plan for helping Queensland children, young people, parents and families experiencing vulnerability*, a five-year, whole-of-government strategy for the final stage of the 10-year program. Our reforms are already yielding results and there is a growing body of evidence the reforms are working – compared to pre-reform there are fewer children who have experienced abuse or neglect and who are unable to be safely cared for by their parents. However there is still more to do to drive reforms and address learnings for children and families, and our five-year roadmap outlines areas for further improvements and changes.

As part of this five-year roadmap, we are supporting the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) to undertake an evaluation to determine whether the reforms are meeting their intended outcomes. The QFCC provides systemic oversight of the child protection system and the Supporting Families Changing Futures reform program. In addition to the QFCC, there are other statutory bodies and oversight and review processes. For example the role of the Office of the Public Guardian includes protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of children in the child protection system.

We are also working collaboratively across government and non-government organisations to make sure reforms are delivering for children and families in all communities. From local area alliances, to the statewide Child and Family Reform Stakeholder Advisory Group, we are working in partnership with communities and many non-government organisations to keep children safe.

At the frontline, Child Safety Officers are working actively with families during Investigation and Assessments, to link parents with support services to help address problems, increase family-led decision making processes with the extended family and keep children safe. Although this means investigations can take longer, this approach is working, with fewer children being found to be in need of protection at the end of Investigation and Assessments.

We are also seeing increasingly complex families who are presenting with multiple needs. For example, 38 per cent of children who came into the care of the department during the 12 months to 30 June 2019, had a parent with current or previous methamphetamine use recorded. This is up from 30 per cent a year ago. This is increasing the number of urgent cases the department needs to respond to. In the last year, the number of our most urgent cases increased by 19.5 per cent.

Despite this increasing complexity, more intensive Investigation and Assessments, and an increasing number of urgent cases, Child Safety Officers are responding to more than 92 per cent of urgent cases within 24 hours.

This result is only possible thanks to the work of the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women's staff and the Queensland Government's funding commitments, which will see an additional 116 frontline departmental staff over the next three years, on top of more than 450 new staff funded since 2015, including 93 this year.

This support for frontline Child Safety Officers has seen caseloads continue to be lower than prior to the reforms, with caseload averages around 17. Of importance to the concerns raised by petitioners, only authorised Child Safety Officers, qualified to perform statutory roles under Queensland child protection laws, are included in this caseload calculation. In addition, 'ex-employees and non-operational staff' are not able to undertake statutory child protection activities. At a minimum, all new Child Safety Officers must hold a bachelor level degree. This degree may be in social work, human services, social welfare, behavioural science or psychology, or be another degree which has included a minimum of six subjects related to human services, psychology or behavioural science. These other degree holders must also have an additional qualification or 12 months relevant work experience.

With more Child Safety Officers and more support staff, training is an important part of our reform. This is why our five-year strategy includes the delivery of a new workforce capability service to provide professional development to better support Queenslanders working in the complex domestic, family and sexual violence sector.

As an example and of particular importance to petitioners, on 9 February 2018, the department released an eLearning training course titled 'Writing for Court.' This course takes up to two hours to complete. This training course is mandatory for new Child Safety Officers as part of their mandatory training suite to be completed within the first 12 months of employment. This course trains staff on the key elements to consider when writing an affidavit in a child protection context.

It is also important to note all Child Safety Officers are supported to write the initial (initiating) affidavits by lawyers working for the Office of the Child and Family Official Solicitor (OCFOS). OCFOS lawyers provide legal support to every Child Safety Service Centre. All affidavits up until the referral to the Director of Child Protection Litigation (DCPL) are quality assured by OCFOS. After that, they are quality assured by the DCPL, the independent decision maker for all child protection applications in Queensland.

The creation of both OCFOS and the DCPL were key Supporting Families Changing Futures reforms implemented in 2016.

Keeping Queensland children safe is a shared responsibility. We support all Queenslanders in reporting concerns, not only to the department, but also directly to community-based support services through Family and Child Connect on 13 32 64. This extra support is underpinned by a contemporary information sharing framework focussed on children's safety and wellbeing. As part of this approach, the department must, where requested, inform notifiers from government and non-government organisations of the department's response to the child protection concerns received.

The Queensland Government is committed to open and accountable reporting on its performance in implementing our *Supporting Families Changing Futures* reforms. Additional information is regularly included at www.csyw.qld.gov.au/campaign/supporting-families.

I trust this information is of assistance to the petitioners.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Di Farmer', with a large, stylized initial 'D'.

Di Farmer MP
Minister for Child Safety, Youth and Women and
Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence