

**QCOGs Inc**

**Queensland Council of Grandparents**

**IA39705**

*KinKare...Caring for  
relative carers and those without access*



**Joint Submission  
QCOGs Inc and KinKare**

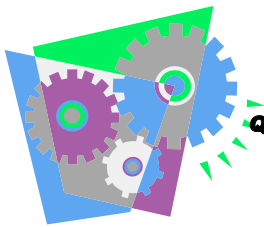
**To  
Queensland Child Protection  
Commission of Inquiry**

**March 2013**

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## **Background:**

This submission is being prepared as a joint document from both QCOGs Inc and KinKare by Maree Lubach. (Maree is currently the **President of QCOGs**, was a co-founder and also is the **Chair of KinKare**, is the **grandparent organisational representative on the Carers Advisory Board to the State Government** and was accepted by the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (**ISPCAN**) to **co-present on grandparent issues at their International Conference in Istanbul in September 2012.**)

As these two organisations have had a strong working relationship for 10 years and have very similar views on the issues being addressed, it was thought prudent to put both submissions together rather than having inquiry members read, virtually, the same one twice.

Both organisations have as their primary concern the wellbeing and interests of second generation parents and their children. These "parents" may be grandparents, great-grandparents, step grandparents or great aunts/uncles etc. They may be raising grandchildren or be denied access to them for many diverse reasons. To simplify the references to the three generations involved, we refer to grandparents, parents and children.

Neither of these organisations has any recurrent funding or similar allegiances to political parties, religious denominations, specific cultural agencies or other such organisations. Between the two organisations there are representatives of many different racial and cultural backgrounds including Indigenous Australians, Africans, English, French, Greek, German, Maori and many more including mainstream communities.

**Our minority group of carers are marginalised by the system and disadvantaged through language, age, culture and stereotyping.**

## **About Us:**

**KinKare** est. 2002

KinKare was established to give support to and advocate for relative carers raising children full-time and those denied access to those children.

During the last 10 years or more, KinKare has been invited to give evidence to numerous Senate and House of Representative enquiries. Most notably was the John Howard enquiry into the Plight of Children after Separation where we are referred to many times in the grandparenting section of the report "**Every Picture Tells a Story**".

KinKare also participated in the State Government inquiries; "Stopping the Drift", and "Improving Permanency for Children in Care" KinKare gave evidence to the **2004 CMC inquiry** into Abuse of Children in Care and consequently had representation on the following consultative committee and implementation committee.

**QCOGs** est 2003

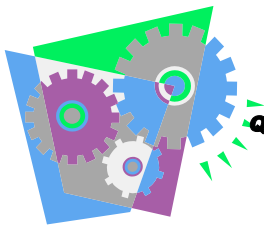
COGs was established to bring together service providers and grandparents through their support group leaders in order to gain services for grandparents which were non-existent back then. It participated in the 2003 report "Grandparents Raising Grandchildren" commissioned by Larry Anthony, who was then Federal Minister for Children & Youth Affairs, and prepared by COTA National Seniors.

Since expanding to include groups from Nth Q'ld it has now become the Q'ld Council of Grandparents, QCOGs.

## **Our Submission:**

In this submission, we intend to particularly **address the Terms of Reference numbered 3 (c) and 3 (d).**

We have also read the **Discussion Paper** recently issued and many of our comments are very relevant to questions posed in that Paper.



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## **Executive Summary**

The inadequacies of the Child Protection System are not unique to Queensland, as has been pointed out by the Commissioner, and nor are inquiries of this nature which seek to find solutions. However, whilst the emphasis of the inquiries remains on the laws, policies and procedures surrounding the system, there is unlikely to be a significant improvement in outcomes for our children or their families.

Similarly, the financial needs of Government should not be a guiding factor in the development of a system which meets the needs of all concerned. Neither throwing money randomly at the problems, nor cutting corners to lower costs, will ultimately have the outcomes desired by all parties.

Undoubtedly, giving funded service providers more money would enable them to both extend their range services and increase the geographic regions they service, but it is doubtful that even this will lower the incidence of child abuse and neglect unless there are more efficient measures put in place to target, respond adequately and independently assess the success of each programme.

This is not meant in any way to denigrate the good work most of the service providers do, but to point out that they are being asked to deliver the impossible to those who can't cope, and with their hands tied behind their backs. Extra funding to allow them to do the same in more areas of need or extended regions, will not cause a decline in child abuse or an increase in functional families. There is a school of thought that suggests families learn how to hide their issues from authorities/agencies who have to report on them.

It is very difficult, however, to hide these major traumatic instances from the extended family, tribe or clan (whichever term is most appropriate in the circumstances) without totally isolating the elders. It is here that the services fall down. Rarely are they inclusive of, and meaningful to, all the key stakeholders. It is well known that child abuse is hidden by secrecy, and "confidentiality" taken to the extreme is secrecy. Hence we have the common occurrence of "systemic abuse" of our children.

If this Inquiry is to have any positive effect at the coalface on the issues it seeks to address, it is going to have to bite the bullet and make some very unpopular and difficult decisions. It will need to get over the bureaucratic mindset that changing a law or policy will solve the problem without ensuring adherence to that change at all levels.

A Case study:

One of our grandparents was talking to a CSO about her fears that the father of the children would make good on his threat to physically abuse the family now that he knew their whereabouts. As she was doing this, her little granddaughter was constantly hitting her leg quite hard. The grandmother turned to the little girl and said that if she continued grandma would hit her back. The CSO responded by making grandma go to a parenting course and when she had completed the course the incident was seen as resolved.

There was no resolution here. The CSO and the service provider of the parenting course were both able to tick all the necessary boxes to indicate a job well done, but the child and her grandmother were still living in real fear of a man well known to the Dept as violent. No recourse was made to them despite the fact that a Dept Officer had accidentally given the father their address. The source of the grandmothers unwise response, and the child's inappropriate behaviour, however, remained unaddressed.

This anecdote is, of course, out of context for both the CSO and the grandparent. However, it does serve to illustrate the point that no amount of changing laws, policies or assessment tools, or the amount of funding given to programmes, will have any real or worthwhile outcome until the implementation of all of these issues is thoroughly examined.

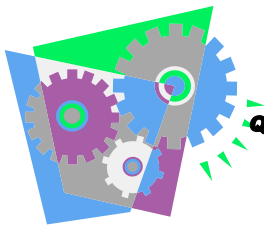
Thank you for giving us the opportunity of addressing this most important Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Maree Lubach

Chair KinKare

President QCOGs



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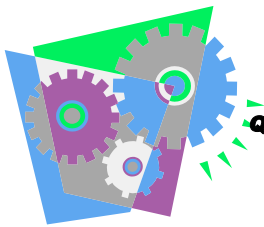
**3 c) reviewing the effectiveness of Queensland's current child protection system in the following areas:**

**i) whether the current use of available resources across the child protection system is adequate and whether resources could be used more efficiently**

- Clearly the spread of resources throughout Queensland is a patchwork system which is not adequately providing appropriate assistance to the most vulnerable and needy. There needs to be an independent appraisal of not only the resources, but the appropriateness of referral.  
E.g. Should a drug addict who has hidden their illness from the Dept be sent to a parenting course, it is possible that they will be assessed as having improved their skills. That is not to say similar bad behaviours won't reoccur during the next withdrawal or "high" stage. The referral has not been appropriate to the need and the monies spent on the programme not used efficiently. Both agencies, however, will probably feel they are justified in returning positive short term reports on the outcome.  
Longitudinal research and studies are essential in developing meaningful programmes tailored to Queensland's needs. Until both the practice of giving funding to agencies, or their programmes, on a short term/ pilot basis predominately, and the huge turnover of Departmental staff, are addressed it is unlikely that this can occur. The programmes therefore will most likely not work at their most efficient level.
- Many of the programmes available to Child Safety Officers and their clients fall under the category of "one size fits all". Parenting courses are a prime example of this. It has been widely assumed in the past that parenting issues will be the same for natural parents, Foster Carers and Kinship Carers. Not so, the family dynamics are vastly different and these needs are rarely addressed adequately. Similarly, different cultures, ages and languages need separate approaches. Currently, it seems that many Dept Officers are aware of this, but have few choices available to them.
- Children who are not living in a safe and stable home with their parents have been traumatised to some degree at least, most likely to a great extent. Expecting counsellors to assist them and their "foster" parents is asking the nigh on impossible. Specialist professionals, in many medical and educational spheres, will need to be called on and given appropriate amounts of time depending on the need. Again, no one size fits all and close monitoring of results must be undertaken.
- The resource called "family" is one of the most powerful available to the Dept, but probably the most underused. It is time for the policy of finding relatives first for children taken into care to be stringently enforced, but also, of course, carefully monitored.
- Kinship Carers, continue to consistently report not being issued with any Dept guidelines or policies when children are placed with them. It is a very traumatic time for them and almost always unexpected. They have not made the conscience decision to take this action and have not undergone the prior training other foster parents have. Consequently, they are unaware of their rights/responsibilities as seen by the Dept. They don't know to ask for Manuals, case plans and conferences let alone realize they have a right to transcripts following meetings. Unfortunately, they are too often taken advantage of in this regard. Prior training can never minimise the anguish they face at knowing what has happened to both the children and grandchildren they love so dearly, but rarely is there any attempt to arrange for assistance to help them through this time. Should things become difficult, there is a never ending list of people who point to their lack of "training".

**ii) the current Queensland government response to children and families in the child protection system including the appropriateness of the level of, and support for, front line staffing;**

- The current Government seems not to be responding at all to families crying out for help.
- At the end of last year QCOGs pointed out several gross inadequacies of the current Government and many public servants were quick to reply and address the issues. They are to be commended for their actions. However, they are obviously working under extremely difficult conditions with little or no support from their political overseers.
- Similarly, the frontline workers of the Dept are poorly supported it seems.
- CSOs have one of the worst jobs conceivable. Many straight from University with few life experiences thrown into the darkest side of our society, child abuse. Despite this, most of them do the very best they can with unreasonably few resources to assist them.
- Again, until the situation at the coalface is promptly and adequately assessed and improved there can only continue to be disgruntled clients and a huge staff turnover which further aggravates the problems..



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***l ii) tertiary child protection interventions, case management, service standards, decision making frameworks and child protection court and tribunal processes;***

- There seems to be a very “cut and dried” attitude to much of this work since the CMC enquiry of 2004 and the separating of the Dept into Child Safety and Communities. Unfortunately the circumstances of families in need is not reflective of this. Grandparents report in greater numbers than ever that if they step in to assist their children in times of need, they are ostracised by the Dept. The children are deemed to no longer be in need of protection and no support or assistance is provided. Very often this leads to the incompetent parents being able to threaten the grandparents with removal of the children unless the parents demands are met.
- It is rare that grandparents report a full and clear understanding of the case management procedures and their role in those procedures. They report on numerous occasions that they are treated as part-time baby sitters with all rights going to miscreant parents leaving them to have to explain seemingly unfair and unjust occurrences to bewildered children.(e.g. the absence of a parent on prearranged contact visits.) Parents have to be made well aware that their behaviours, at all times, must be in the child’s best interest.. Currently, this is not the case.
- There is a need for an independent intermediary agency to assist with investigation, intake and assessment procedures after screening out vexatious reports. The process needs to begin with a family conference which includes the extended family and other key stakeholders where appropriate. This would help ensure a more holistic approach to substantiate reports and the full awareness of all participants of resulting actions. The SCAN team would be seen as a further step in the process if the situation was severe.
- It must be noted here that while confidentiality is a basic right, it must not be used as tool to invoke secrecy.
- Timeframes Officers are given in policy documents must also be monitored to make sure they are adhered to. Grandparents are still reporting that they can wait two or more weeks to have a phone call answered. Such action implies overwork of the officers and leads to great frustration on the part of the caller. Consequently, a negative attitude builds against the worker which can escalate into disharmony between the parties.
- Reunification at any cost appears to still be the unwritten underlying principle of Dept. Officers. Unfortunately, the reality is that drug addiction, mental illness and other disorders often diminish the ability of the parent to provide a safe and secure environment for their children. As much as the parents intentions are noble, their capabilities are not up to standard and our children deserve better.
- Key stakeholders, including parents at times, are not given the reasonable notice required by policy of Court and other such actions. This is yet another area which needs scrutiny.

***iv) the transition of children through, and exiting the child protection system;***

- The issue of the number of different placements a child is likely to have during this procedure is paramount to their probability of a successful exiting of the system. Key matters mentioned above are seen as needing attention before the current rates can be made more acceptable.

***d) reviewing the effectiveness of the monitoring, investigation, oversight and complaint mechanisms for the child protection system and identification of ways to improve oversight of and public confidence in the child protection system;***

- Monitoring, investigation and oversight of the system cannot be implemented until there is some non-adversarial and independent advocacy system In place. Currently, unless grievances escalate to major proportions, there is no independent avenue for them to be aired and resolved. Any system which relies so extremely heavily on self-monitoring as the Dept does is bound to be seen as corrupt and/ or dictatorial.
- Just as the Police have had success with their cultural liaison teams, the Dept could as well. It is time for a new approach to the manner in which our Government reacts to reported incidences of child abuse. It is one of the only areas in our society where accusations of criminal offences or wrong doings are still permitted to remain secret.

***It is our overall recommendation that establishing a fair and transparent system of advocacy, liaison and accountability open and accessible to all will, in itself, make great advances in correcting many of the currently existing issues.***