
Response to the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry Discussion Paper

Prepared by BoysTown



BoysTown

Fresh start.
New hope.

Authorised By:

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Overview

BoysTown is highly supportive of the strategy being proposed by the Commission to divert Queensland families from the tertiary child protection system through the development of referral pathways to primary and secondary family support services as well as the introduction of new practices and the functional realignment of the system. BoysTown also supports the other key strategy being proposed whereby universal and secondary services would be strengthened to reduce the incidence of child abuse in our community.

It is our view that for there to be an effective partnership between Government and the non-government sector on this issue then it is crucial that an Industry Plan be developed for the sector. This plan would analyse the existing capacity of the sector to respond to any reforms implemented by Government, examine workforce planning requirements and identify effective strategies for sector growth to meet these service challenges. In our view this is a critical component of the reform process given the Discussion Paper's analysis that the funding of family support services has historically had a low priority when compared to other elements of the child protection system.

Similarly this process could also be undertaken across State Government Departments, as a whole of government response will also be critical in implementing the reform process.

We also suggest that a robust evaluation strategy be implemented as part of the reform process. This evaluation would measure the impact of the reform against its stated purpose on at least an annual basis. The proposals for reform in the Discussion Paper are wide ranging and it is critical that the implementation process be progressively evaluated to assess overall systemic outcomes.

To place BoysTown's response in perspective a brief overview of our services together with their intersection with the child protection system is provided.

About BoysTown

BoysTown is a national organisation and registered charity that specialises in helping disadvantaged young people and families who are at risk of social exclusion. Established in 1961, BoysTown's mission *is to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised and without voice, to improve their quality of life*. BoysTown believes that all young people in Australia should be able to lead hope-filled lives, and have the capacity to participate fully in the society in which they live.

BoysTown currently provides a range of 'face to face' and virtual services to young people and families seeking primary and secondary intervention and crisis support services. These services include:

- Kids Helpline, a national 24/7 telephone and on-line information support and counselling service for five to 25 year olds with special capacity for young people with mental health issues. Kids Helpline responded to over 285,000 contacts from children and young people last calendar year. In 2012 62,596 of these contacts were with Queensland children and young people. Kids Helpline deals with over 20 duty of care responses each week. These are interventions required to protect children, such as contacting an emergency service or child protection agency. There have been annual increases in duty

of care actions in recent times. In 2011 Kids Helpline provided 1,139 duty of care responses compared to 546 responses in 2006.

- Parentline is a telephone counselling service for parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory. The Queensland component of the service is funded by the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services. Each year Parentline provides about 11,000 telephone and email counselling sessions to Queensland parents and carers.
- Accommodation responses to homeless families and women and children seeking refuge from Domestic/Family Violence.
- Parenting Programs offering case work, group work support and child development programs for young parents and their children.
- The Next Step (TNS) service in Logan that offers intensive case management to young people aged 12-21 who may be pregnant, parenting or at risk of becoming a parent and young people aged 15-25 experiencing mental illness or showing early signs of developing mental illness.

BoysTown recognises that multi-systemic services are required to increase the levels of social inclusion experienced by marginalised youth. Consequently BoysTown also delivers a range of labour market programs including:

- Employment placement and support services through Job Services Australia. BoysTown is one of only a few national youth specialist providers in this network. BoysTown's average monthly caseload in this program is just over 4,000 participants.
- Paid employment to more than 120 young people at any one time in Intermediate Labour Market (social enterprises) programs that prepare long term unemployed youth who may have a wide range of issues including mental health, minimal educational qualifications and offending behaviours, for transition to the mainstream workforce.
- Training programs that develop the vocational and social skills of young people allowing them to re-engage with education and/or employment.

BoysTown is also an experienced provider of community engagement and development services as demonstrated by:

- Performing the role of Facilitating Partner for the Communities for Children initiative in Deception Bay
- Working with peoples from the remote Indigenous communities of the Tjurabalan in Western Australia
- Indigenous community, parent and carer links to schools through PACE.

Children and young people use Kids Helpline to seek assistance and intervention in relation to child abuse concerns. These concerns may involve either allegations relating to physical, sexual, emotional and neglect harm as well as exposure to family violence, exploitation by family members and issues relating to their experiences of out-of-home care. In 2012 Kids Helpline responded to 5,507 concerns where one or more of these related to child abuse. As a group this accounted for 8% of all counselling sessions in that year. In relation to child abuse contacts from Queensland, Kids Helpline provided 1,068 counselling responses amounting to 8% of all counselling contacts.

Furthermore, Parentline received 386 presentations in relation to child abuse concerns from Queensland parents and carers in 2012. This amounted to 3% of all counselling contacts provided by this service in that year.

BoysTown is also known for having previously operated a campus style residential service for young men from 1961 to 2001. Work with children and

young people subject to protective orders continues through our regional based services relating to educational reengagement, School to Work Transition and employment support programs.

Responses to the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry Discussion Paper

This submission will focus on providing responses to those issues, identified by the Commissioner, as being most relevant to the service experience of BoysTown. Despite the situation that significant numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are involved in BoysTown programs, this submission will not provide comment on the issue of overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system as we believe consistent with the principle of self-determination that the Commission needs to engage with Indigenous communities as a first stage in preparing a response. Subsequently not all questions raised by the Commissioner will be dealt with in this paper.

Question 1 and 2:

- ***What is the best way to get agencies working together to plan for secondary child protection services?***
- ***What is the best way to get agencies working together to deliver secondary services in the most cost effective way?***

BoysTown acknowledges the need for family support services in Queensland that deliver secondary level evidence based, and place based responses to vulnerable families such as the Helping Out Families (HOF) initiative. We recommend though that responses such as HOF be adequately resourced to provide a mix of early intervention and secondary level services, as well as a mix of short and long term responses with a flexible amount of hours available per family per week for up to 12 months. Many families require intensive support as opposed to the current limit of one hour per week for up to six months.

BoysTown is a strong supporter of models of practice that involve outreach work with individuals and families in community settings, as well as intensive case management as a model of working with vulnerable individuals and families. Outcomes delivered to date by The Next Step (TNS) program prove that intensive levels of support can assist young parents to develop their core life and parenting skills and address the underlying causes impacting on their capacity to provide a safe, stable and nurturing environment for their children.

Based on BoysTown's organisational experience in managing the Communities for Children program in Deception Bay and as current Lead Agency for TNS in the Logan-Beenleigh area, we believe Family Alliance networks could be developed via a 'Lead Agency' model and enhanced by 'seed' and recurrent funding that would allow for:

1. A local mapping of services by the Lead Agency in consultation with key community stake holders to identify available resources, gaps and unmet need.
2. Provision of a local place based training budget, managed by the Lead Agency in consultation with stake holders, to develop a common framework for practice, to skill local agency staff in core capabilities identified and agreed to by local community service providers within the Family Support Alliance and incorporating relevant cultural practices.

3. Provision of a local place based area budget for the development and delivery of early intervention and secondary prevention services, administered by the Lead Agency for the Family Support Alliance.
4. Separation of network coordination and service provision responsibilities within the Family Support Alliance. This would require that the Lead Agency undertake primary responsibility for the planning, funding distribution and coordination of services within the network, rather than direct service provision. This would prevent the emergence of any possible conflict of interest issues arising from the devolution of funding management to the Lead Agency as recommended in points 2 and 3.

This devolution of funding responsibility to Family Support Alliance networks would empower them to undertake place based planning and to customise the suite of family support services to meet the needs of local communities. This model would also contribute to strengthening the capacity of the service sector to effectively respond to local needs and to identify and respond to new and emerging issues.

Question 3:

- ***Which intake and referral model is best suited to Queensland?***

BoysTown believes on balance that Option 1 (Dual Referral Pathway) canvassed by the Commissioner in the Discussion Paper offers the most effective model for Queensland. As noted in the Discussion Paper it is our view that this will lead to increased self referral and a reduction in the stigmatisation that some families feel in seeking help. Removing barriers to help seeking would encourage greater access to community based family support services without entry into the tertiary system.

Option 2 is not favoured as there is advantage in Government maintaining a direct role in the intake process as decisions taken at this stage involve judgements as to whether families should be subjected to the exercise of statutory intervention. Government through its line agencies need to direct participants in these decisions. Furthermore risk management regarding intake and referral in Option 1 would be the joint responsibility of both Government and the Not-for-Profit sector as opposed to being totally transferred to the latter as in Option 2.

A further consideration in the development of this system is that it needs to be responsive to children and young people. As well as families being able to more directly seek support from place based services, children and young people also need to be able to raise their concerns about abuse directly to an appropriate agency.

Children need to be provided with a diverse range of pathways to register their concerns about abuse. There is research suggesting that young people when help seeking tend to access family, peers and then the internet for information and assistance¹. Furthermore in relation to contemporary research on online counselling it is clear that this modality is used by young people to disclose issues of deep concern that they would find too confronting to disclose in either a 'face

¹ King, R., Bickman, L., Shochet, I., McDermott, B., Bor, B. 2010. Use of the internet for provision of better counselling and psychotherapy services to young people, their families and carers. *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 17 (1): 68

to face' situation or in direct contact with an adult via telephone². Furthermore, in listening to children concerning their experience with the child protection system Kids Helpline counsellors are often informed that many children could not fully disclose their concerns to child protection intake workers in statutory agencies as they felt alienated by the forensic style of questioning that they experienced. Consequently the intake and referral system needs to provide diverse pathways for children and young people to disclose harm including online engagement and child centred strategies.

Question 6:

- ***How could we improve the system's response to frequently encountered families?***

In Section 4.2.3 the Commissioner discusses the issues associated with the investigation and assessment of families where family violence is present. The Commissioner also notes research suggesting that families where family violence is present are more likely to have prior child safety services involvement. BoysTown provides accommodation and therapeutic support to women and their children who have left situations of family violence. Consequently based on this experience we would like to provide the following comments:

1. It is important that child harm notifications that include family violence remain in the ambit of the tertiary investigation system as this would more readily enable the prosecution of perpetrators. It is recognised that some people impacted by family violence may prefer not to criminalise the acts done against them. However, it is our belief that domestic and family violent behaviours and acts are criminal in nature. Furthermore we believe that there is a greater likelihood of safety for the aggrieved and their children if police action against the perpetrator is initiated as it makes clear to all parties the seriousness of the violent act. There should be a bias towards the initiation of criminal proceedings for any acts of violence on the aggrieved and their children.
2. It is vital that workers involved in the Intake and Assessment, Investigation and Assessment and in the proposed Multi-Disciple Case Work Teams either have capability to work with families characterised by violence or access to specialist family violence practitioners to guide their practice. Consequently BoysTown supports the proposal by the Commissioner to have Family Violence workers embedded within each of the intervention stages.
3. Specialist support services need to be available to work with the custodial parent, usually the mother, who has been subjected to the violence to lessen harm to the child. Evidence shows that children's safety and emotional well-being is directly linked to the safety of their mother. An Australian study on women's experiences of domestic violence highlights the importance of providing appropriate support to mothers so they can respond effectively and sensitively to their children's needs. In the long term, this will reduce the impact of trauma and the experience of violence on the child³. Research shows that children and adult victims can cope and recover, particularly when specialised services are provided.

² King, et al. 2010. 68

³ Hester, M. (2010). 'Mothering through domestic violence', paper presented to *Mothers, children and change: Strengthening service support and safety*, Sydney. Retrieved from: <http://www.adfvc.unsw.edu.au/> on 30 August 2011

4. The sector requires a considerable injection of new funds for the development of services to respond to family violence. BoysTown is very aware of the Commission's Terms of Reference including that any recommendations take into consideration the fiscal position of the State. However it needs to be recognised that the current Family Violence sector is severely under resourced. This is evident in the findings from the 2009 report by the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children⁴. Consequently it is unlikely that support services to meet the needs of families will be available to assist in the resolution of harm to the children unless further funding is made available. This will continue to be a pressure on the child protection system and will continue to hamper its effectiveness in ensuring children's safety.

Coordinated Commonwealth and State action is needed to address this issue. It is suggested that the Queensland Government place this matter on the agenda for the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to seek the development of a National Partnership Agreement on ending family violence.

Question 9

- ***Should the department have access to an alternative response to notifications other than an investigation and assessment (for example, a differential response model)? If so, what should the alternatives be?***

BoysTown strongly supports the proposal relating to the introduction of differential response pathways to address reported concerns about children and notifications of harm. As noted in the discussion paper tertiary intervention in families may unintentionally increase risk to children as social networks around the family fracture due to concerns about who reported the matter and families may be more inclined not to seek assistance due to the perceived threat of statutory intervention.

The range of possible responses outlined on page 96 appears appropriate.

Question 14

- ***What are the potential benefits or disadvantages of the proposed multi-disciplinary casework team approach?***

In our view the main benefits and possible pitfalls of this model are outlined in the Table Below:

⁴ Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, 2009-2021; 75-76

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p><i>Accessibility of Services</i></p> <p>Immediate access by families to a broader range of services than can currently be provided from Child Safety centres.</p>	<p><i>Professional Conflict</i></p> <p>Practitioners will commence with different practice frameworks which could lead to conflict.</p>
<p><i>Innovative Practice</i></p> <p>The interaction between different knowledge and skills sets from a variety of professions may be conducive to the emergence of new approaches to intervention</p>	<p><i>Risk of fragmented responses to families</i></p> <p>Team approaches always contain the inherent risk that not all members working with a family at all times will have a consistent approach. This will require the development of clear practice and coordination procedures.</p>
<p><i>Safeguarding resources for casework</i></p> <p>The organisational structure will quarantine dedicated resources to casework with families subject to tertiary intervention. This will lessen the risk that resources will be continually absorbed into investigation activity.</p>	

Overall BoysTown believes that with appropriate leadership these teams can be effective with significant potential to improve the support of families.

Question 18

- ***To what extent should young people continue to be provided with support on leaving the care system?***

A principle established by the Forde Inquiry is that if the State through the child protection system acts to move children from their families and by doing so assumes the role of parent, then there exists a moral imperative on the State to act as a 'good' parent. This principle is as relevant today as when it was first articulated by Commissioner Forde.

Research indicates that the transition young people face in becoming independent is challenging and stressful for many⁵.

Ideally young people are able to rely on their parents and/or families for support during this time of transition and it is in part through those close, supportive relationships that the acquisition of practical life skills are learnt and reinforced. These learnings build upon those gained in other contexts such as school, recreational and sporting settings and in external relationships with friends, peers and adults.

⁵ White and Wyn, 2004

For disadvantaged youth not fortunate enough to have stable family supports this scenario is often not the case resulting in additional challenges such as homelessness, poverty, and possible involvement with the justice system⁶.

Young people exiting care form one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. *"Pre-care experiences of abuse and neglect, combined with poor in care experiences, accelerated transitions to adulthood, and a lack of ongoing support after leaving care, make many of them vulnerable to a number of poor outcomes"*⁷.

Consequently in the face of this evidence, if the State's responsibility is to act as a 'good parent' then it is imperative that adequate resources be provided to support all young people leaving its guardianship to establish their independence in a positive way in the community. This requires a partnership between whole of Government services e.g. Health and Education as well as with the community sector. Transition from care plans need to be developed early allowing sufficient time for relationships to develop between the young person and their future support network. Strong case management is required for a period of time after exit to ensure the safety and well being of the young person.

Question 19

- **In an environment of competing fiscal demands on all government agencies, how can support to young people leaving care be improved?**

Improvements to the support of young people leaving care require innovations at both a policy and practice level.

The Commission notes in its analysis of issues impacting on planning for these young people the impact of an apparent lack of coordination between State agencies (Discussion Paper: p150-2). However there are also issues in relation to the intersection of these young people with Commonwealth funded services.

For example, young people transitioning from care unless they are continuing study will most likely become participants in the Job Services Australia (JSA) program, an employment placement and support service. Currently it is not possible for JSA providers to register students identified by their schools as at risk of not making a successful transition to work. Rather than leaving them 'drift' in the school system as occurs at present, students could be registered with JSA providers to enable the development of transition plans. Furthermore many of these 'at risk' students either prematurely leave school or if completing school then become inactive with no formal income support without being aware of the supports available to them in the JSA system. There are many other examples of how the current lack of coordination between State and Commonwealth systems facilitates vulnerable and 'at risk' young people to fall through the gaps in the service system. This is both detrimental to them and also to society who then endures a long term economic cost from 'not supporting young people to succeed as adults' (Discussion Paper: p 141).

⁶ Uggen & Wakefield 2005 cited in Costello, M. & MacRae-Krisa, L. 2011 An Environmental Scan of Best Practices in Supporting Persistent Youth Offenders in the Transition to Adulthood. *Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family*

⁷ Mendes, P. Johnson, G. & Moslehudden, B. Effectively preparing young people to transition from out of home care *Family Matters* 2011 No. 89

There is an opportunity for the Queensland Government to lead discussions at a Commonwealth Heads of Government level to develop and implement actions to improve the integration of Commonwealth and State services for this group.

At a practice level the evidence noted by the Commission clearly shows that transitional planning for young people leaving care is happening either haphazardly or not at all. It is our belief that this work can not be effectively carried out within a statutory agency due to systemic issues regarding the nature of this work. The Discussion Paper notes that transitioning young people from care requires workers to establish relationships with them that require time and consistency in contact. This is difficult to achieve in an agency striving to meet an ever changing mosaic of priorities relating to ensuring the safety of children. In resource poor environments, there will always be inherent tension between responding to crisis to meet the immediate safety needs of children with the need to provide longer term and consistent interventions with some client groups including young people transitioning from care.

In addition as noted in the Discussion Paper, these young people require support across a range of systems including education and employment. The Commission report notes that Child Safety officers are not skilled in delivering employment training (Discussion Paper: 151). In contrast there are many Not for Profit agencies such as BoysTown with extensive experience in delivering holistic wrap-around intervention for young people with complex needs including education re-engagement and employment support. Workers with wider skill sets can be sourced from Not for Profit agencies.

Consequently there is value in outsourcing this role to community based, mission driven Not for Profit services. The establishment of funding contracts would ensure that dedicated resources were made available to young people transitioning from care to achieve positive outcomes relating to independence.

In relation to the preferred intervention model for this group, BoysTown based on our service experience advocates for an Intensive Case Management strategy. Intensive Case Management (ICM) is a model of intensive one on one support that uses the relationship between the client and the worker as a primary component of intervention to facilitate meaningful change in the client's life. Intensive Case Management is an appropriate model of intervention with young people in exiting care because:

- very disadvantaged young people often need assistance to identify and access the services that can help them;
- vulnerable young people often need support to successfully complete the interventions they are referred to or linked in with;
- when young people have complex needs, they require recognition and responses to all their needs in a coordinated fashion, rather than a specialised service focusing on one issue or goal while not addressing others;
- over time, intensive case management can increase a person's capacity to make use of support, achieve more sustainable outcomes and move towards self-management⁸; and
- support needs to be extended into young adulthood, as few young people leaving care at age 18 are able to successfully transition. Interdependence is already the norm for young adults with supportive parents well beyond 18 years.

⁸ The Next Step (TNS) Practice Manual 2013

Our own experience, as well as the findings of external studies indicates that intensive models of case management deliver positive outcomes⁹.

Question 20

- ***Does Queensland have the capacity for the non-government sector to provide transition from care planning?***

Based on our response to Question 19 it is clear that we believe some Not for Profit services have the inherent capacity to work effectively with young people transitioning from care. However as stated in our introductory comments the capacity of the sector to respond to all of the Discussion Paper's proposed reforms together with its workforce planning requirements needs to be analysed in a detailed way in the process of developing an Industry Plan.

Conclusion

BoysTown would like to propose two recommendations for consideration by the Commission on two issues not canvassed in the Discussion Paper. These recommendations are outlined below:

Recommendation 1:

That the Commission make a recommendation in its Final Report for the development of an Industry Plan in respect to the Queensland Not for Profit sector to determine capacity, capability and workforce planning requirements to support proposed child protection reforms

Recommendation 2:

That the Commission recommend the implementation of an evaluation strategy to progressively measure the impact of the reform process

⁹ Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disabilities, *LBYPQ Quarterly Reports*, Logan., Thomson Goodall Associates 2007 Intensive case management data collection and analysis report *Department of Human Services, Victoria.*, Morgenstern, J. Riordan, A. McCrady, B. McVeigh, K. Blanchard, K. & Irwin, T. *Intensive Case Management Improves Welfare Clients' Rates of Entry and Retention in Substance Abuse Treatment, Jan 2001.*, *Young offender learning and skills - A review of policy and practice The Scottish Government*<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/12/18103851/12>