

6 September 2017

Committee Secretary
Health, Communities, Disability Services, and Domestic and Violence Prevention Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

Dear Committee

QCOSS is the peak body for the community services sector and a voice for people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, poverty and disadvantage. In undertaking our work, we partner with organisations across the sector and indeed around the country through the COSS network. In relation to child and family services we work closely with the two peak bodies in Queensland – PeakCare Queensland Inc (PeakCare) and the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP) and acknowledge and recognise their expertise in matters of child protection.

In this regard, we provide only a high level submission to the Parliamentary Committee on the proposed *Child Protection Reform Amendment Bill* (the Bill). We support the submissions provided by PeakCare and QATSICPP and strongly encourage the Committee to consider favourably the views and approaches put forward by these two organisations.

There are a number of points however, that we would like to make in relation to the Bill.

QCOSS supports amending the paramount principle in the Act to refer to the safety, wellbeing and best interests of a child both through childhood and for the rest of the child's life. This places the child at the centre of all decision making and embeds a long term approach to that decision making. Importantly that considers, not just the immediate impacts, but also any ongoing impacts throughout their life. As we know, the experiences and decisions made through early years and childhood can, and do, have significant impact on their wellbeing and consideration should always be given to the potential long term impacts.

QCOSS also completely supports maintaining the cultural connections for children in out of home care. QCOSS has joined the Family Matters Campaign in acknowledgement that we need a new way of working to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up well, safe and cared for in their families, communities and their culture. As such we are strong supporters of the approach outlined in this Bill to embed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principle and the explicit application of the five elements of the principle – prevention, partnership, placement, participation and connection – at the heart of all decisions relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The ability for delegation of the powers and functions of the chief executive to the chief executive of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entity is supported. We are also supportive of the inclusion of acknowledgement of self determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Issues of permanency are also of interest to us. We are supportive, in principle, of approaches that embed principles of permanency into decision making for children. At the heart of this, is the right of all children to have long term, stable living arrangements. However, we have some concern regarding the proposal to introduce permanent care orders. In this regard, we would encourage the Committee to consider carefully the advice of our colleagues at PeakCare and QATSICPP. While the principles of permanency may be supported – including consideration of permanency planning and long term goals, we do not support the introduction of a permanent care order. Should they be implemented, of particular concern is the inability for children or parents to instigate a review of revocation of such orders. QCOSS believes that should circumstances change, children and their families should have the ability to seek a variation of such an order. This is consistent with principles that place the child at the centre of decision making and recognising that retaining connection to family (immediate and extended) is important for the long term positive outcomes for that child.

In this context, we are also concerned that permanent care orders risk severing cultural connections in circumstances where children are in placements that are disconnected from their families and communities. Where permanent care orders contain no requirements for the ongoing maintenance of cultural connections, the risk is even greater.

Provisions to improve the transition from care support for young people are very welcome and are consistent with long term planning and the consideration of life outcomes in decision making. Commencement of support and planning for transition from 15 years is supported. QCOSS supports PeakCare's concerns about the exclusion of young people who have been subject to a long term guardianship order or a permanent care order (should they be introduced) and recommend that the Committee consider the issues raised in PeakCare's submission.

Information sharing is critical in providing integrated support for children and families across agencies and organisations. Contemporary approaches to service delivery are increasing the importance of this, including:

- A focus on prevention and early intervention that will in some instances require a transition from a provider focussing on prevention to another if protection is required for the child/children
- A shifting of responsibility for supporting children and families from the Department to a range of specialist service providers.

While rights to privacy remain paramount, prioritising the safety, wellbeing and best interests of a child in the development of a contemporary information sharing regime is supported.

In conclusion, QCOSS urges the Committee to consider the positive impact that many of the proposed amendments will have on the lives of children and young people in care or leaving care. We strongly recommend that you consider the detailed submission provided by our colleagues at PeakCare and QATSICPP, in particular noting their concerns about the need for permanent care orders. We appreciate the opportunity to provide this submission.

Your sincerely



Mark Henley
Chief Executive Officer