

**THE DEPARTMENT FOR CHILD PROTECTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT  
AND  
NON-GOVERNMENT PLACEMENT AGENCIES  
PROTOCOL FOR STANDARD OF CARE AND SAFETY AND WELLBEING  
CONCERNS FOR CHILDREN IN THE CEO'S CARE  
DECEMBER 2013**

The primary objective of the Department for Child Protection and Family Support (the Department) and Non Government Placement Agencies (Placement Agencies) as those with responsibility for children in the Chief Executive Officer's (CEO's) care, is to act in the child's best interest, for the child's benefit, and with the child's safety and well-being as paramount considerations. This objective is supported by the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*.

To further this objective, the Department and the Placement Agencies have agreed to work together, through the use of these protocols whenever a concern arises of harm to a child or young person or in relation to the standard of care they receive in the care of a Placement Agency. The protocols establish a joint understanding of the processes, procedures, roles and responsibilities of both the Department and Placement Agencies.

The Department, and in some instances the Police, has the statutory responsibility for investigating and assessing any safety and wellbeing concern or suspicion of harm.<sup>1</sup> This can include a range of situations where the harm may have occurred, including in placement, outside of the home, at school or on contact visits with family, as well as harm by another child or young person, or an approved carer or other agency worker. The concerns may relate to harm which has occurred recently or which occurred some time ago and the child has since left care.

If concerns involve Placement Agency carers, members of the carer's household, staff or volunteers, the Placement Agency will contribute to and support any Departmental assessment process, provide support to the carer through the process, and assist to ensure the safety of that child and any other children in their care.

In addition to the development of these protocols and their own internal policies, placement agencies will endeavour to minimise the risk to children in their care. This will occur through practices such as developing the agency as a child safe organisation; conducting assessment and training of carers, staff and volunteers, maintaining appropriate levels of criminal recording checking, Working with Children requirements, ensure all carers are registered through the Foster Carer Directory and providing quality support to carers in their role.

The Department will ensure sound processes for the identification and assessment of standard of care concerns and safety and wellbeing concerns for children in the care of the CEO, ensuring children are safe and protected. The Department will ensure children subject to harm are referred for appropriate legal advice and representation.

**GUIDING PRINCIPLES:**

- The safety and well-being of the child or young person is the paramount consideration at all times.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1 for Department for Child Protection definitions of abuse and neglect.

- The working relationship between Placement Agencies, carers and Departmental staff is characterised by mutual respect, honesty, and fairness.
- Any concern that a child has been or is likely to be harmed whilst in care must be assessed by the Department.
- The Department has final decision-making authority with regard to the placement of children.
- Carers are entitled to support and guidance when issues or concerns arise about the care they provide.
- A commitment to collaboration, teamwork and problem solving are essential conditions for resolving differences.
- There is a commitment to clear communication by all parties.
- All actions under these protocols are carried out in an objective and timely manner.
- There is an awareness of and responsiveness to cultural issues where a child is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or is from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Background.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

- These protocols will be made known to all relevant Placement Agency staff, carers and volunteers on commencement with the Agency.
- These protocols will be referred to in the Department's Casework Practice Manual.
- These protocols form a part of the Better Care Better Services standards, which Placement Agencies meet as part of their Service Agreement requirements.
- The Department and Placement Agencies will apply these protocols within their procedures for staff.

## **PROCEDURES**

The following processes provide guidance for the agreed procedures for managing Standard of Care and Safety and Wellbeing Concerns for children in the CEO's care.

The Department has implemented a Two Tier approach to concerns in relation to the safety and wellbeing of children in the CEO's care:

- Tier One – Standard of Care Concerns and Carer Standard of Care Assessment by Placement Agency and Safety and Wellbeing Assessment by the District.
- Tier Two – Safety and Wellbeing Concerns and Carer Investigation by the Department's Duty of Care Unit (DoCU) (for approved carers) or Safety and Wellbeing Assessment by the District (for employees).

If the concern involves Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, the Aboriginal Practice Leader will be consulted. In complex situations, and if a child is from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background the Department's Senior CALD Advisors may be consulted if necessary.

### **Disclosures or allegations of harm**

A child may disclose information about harm directly to an agency carer or other staff. Where this occurs basic processes include: listening without asking clarifying or follow-up questions, believing the child and acting on the information. It is not the role of the agency to determine if the disclosure is 'true'. The child should be reassured and supported throughout, but is not to be questioned further by Placement Agency staff. Placement Agency staff must

immediately advise the Department of the disclosure. The Departmental case manager is the first point of contact.

The Placement Agency may become aware of or suspect that harm has occurred without the child having made a disclosure. In such circumstances the Placement Agency will advise the child's Departmental case manager and consult on the best way to proceed. If the Departmental case manager is not available the Placement Agency can contact the Team Leader.

If the child concerned is not a child in the CEO's care, but is in a placement for other reasons, the Placement Agency will advise and consult with the Department's District Intake Duty Team Leader or Duty Officer on how the situation will be managed.

Concerns that a child may be subject to harm may come from a range of sources. These may be brought to the attention of the carer or other agency staff, or may come to the case manager or others in the Department.

### **Advising the Department**

Placement Agencies will develop internal processes to manage when the agency becomes aware of or holds concerns about the harm of a child or the standard of care provided to a child and will, on request, make these available to the Department.

The Placement Agency will immediately advise the Department of the concern via the child's case manager. If the case manager is not available or the concern involves a child without a current case manager, the Placement Agency will advise the Team Leader or the District Director. If the Placement Agency becomes aware of a concern after hours, the agency will inform the Crisis Care Unit.

The Department will assess the concern and will advise the agency on what information can be provided to the carer and or employee as soon as practicable.

Where the Department receives information of concern about a Placement Agency's carer, they will immediately inform a senior officer of the Placement Agency, and advise what information about the concern can be provided to the carer. Where criminal offences may have occurred, the Police will be informed.

It is not the role of the Placement Agency to raise concerns with the carer or the child prior to consultation with the Department as this could compromise the assessment and could lead to a contamination of evidence. This may leave a child unsafe, or a carer unable to have a process of natural justice. Whilst supporting the carer, agencies will remain open and objective.

### **Ensure the child is safe and supported**

The Placement Agency in consultation with the Department will endeavour to ensure that the child does not remain in a situation of risk pending further assessment. Where harm is alleged to have occurred between children living in the same house, the children may need to be placed separately. There may also be instances which involve removing all the children in a Family Group Home or Residential Care Setting or the carer, rather than removal of one child.

The child may have feelings of ambivalence, anxiety, fear, depression, mistrust or marginalisation after making a disclosure or having been subject to harm. It is important for

the child to feel protected, valued and nurtured. The Departmental case manager will take the role of supporting the child.

### **Support to carers**

Support processes for the carer(s) are put into place by the Placement Agency as soon as the matter is referred to the Department and are to continue throughout the process. Support will be provided to the carer whether the alleged harm relates to the carer, relates to alleged harm between children, or to harm which has occurred outside of the care setting.

The main support that can be given to the carer is to keep them as informed as possible. However, the assessment may require that certain information is withheld from the carer. The carer needs to understand that the amount and timing of release of information to them will depend upon the nature of the allegation, the police assessment if there is one, and any other relevant factors.

The Placement Agency may consider it appropriate to involve others in the provision of support, such as the Foster Care Association of Western Australia.

### **Departmental response in relation to Approved Carers**

#### *Tier 1: Standard of Care Concerns*

Standard of care concerns are acts or situations that indicate that a carer has failed to meet the carer competencies<sup>2</sup>, but harm or risk of harm has not occurred. The focus should be on addressing the concern, rather than investigating it. Standard of care concerns may include:

- Inappropriate discipline where there is no physical injury e.g. smacking a child with an open hand on the bottom.
- Inadequate supervision of the child or young person.
- Inappropriate behaviour modelling by the carer including substance abuse.
- Physical environment in the carer's home that is potentially unsafe or unhygienic.
- Verbal interaction with the child or young person that is offensive, intimidating or degrading.
- Measures used to restrain or contain a child or young person outside guidelines for best practice.
- Preventing the child or young person from participating in specialised care and treatment that is recommended for adequate developmental progress.
- Restricting a child or young person's connections to cultural or kinship ties, derogatory comments relating to race, culture, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, gender.
- Carer not working cooperatively with departmental staff.
- Carer actively undermining contact between the child and biological family.

The following action is undertaken by the Child Protection Worker identifying the concern and the Agency:

- Consultation can occur with Duty Officer DoCU.

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<sup>2</sup> The carer competencies are described at Appendix 3.

- A Carer Standard of Care Incident notification is recorded for the carer and quality assured by DoCU.
- A meeting is convened by the Child Protection Worker with the Agency Director or their delegate and the concerns are outlined. Relevant Documentation, including the notification, is provided to the Agency.
- The Child Protection Worker undertakes a Safety and Wellbeing Assessment (SWA).
- The Agency undertakes an assessment, advises the carer of the care concern and gives the carer an opportunity to respond to the concern.
- The Agency develops, implement and Document an appropriate response including carer supports, monitoring, supervision or training.
- The Agency advises the carer and the Child Protection Worker of the assessment outcome, the recommendations, including how, when and by whom they will be implemented.
- The Agency completes an Outcome Report and forwards to the Child Protection Worker.
- The Child Protection Worker includes their comments and recommendations and provides a copy of the final report to the Agency.

*Tier 2: Safety and Wellbeing Concerns in Care and Carer Investigation*

Where there are concerns about a child in the CEO's care that meet the Department's threshold for harm then the Department's district office will undertake a safety and wellbeing assessment (SWA). If an approved carer<sup>3</sup> is the person alleged responsible for causing the harm then a carer investigation will be undertaken by DoCU. In these situations the district must immediately consult with the DoCU. The SWA and carer investigation are undertaken concurrently but each has a different purpose and outcome. The SWA determines if harm has occurred and who is responsible for the harm. The Carer Investigation assesses the carer's compliance with the carer competencies and makes recommendations regarding the carer's approval.

The DoCU will record carer investigation notifications in relation to the carers. The Placement Agency will liaise with the Custodian of the Foster Carer Directory to ensure that the carers are placed under review and an alert is recorded to this effect on Assist.

As soon as possible after being advised, the DoCU will hold an initial planning meeting which will determine processes, roles, responsibilities and timeframes. This will involve Team Leader, Case Manager, DoCU, Placement Agency Representative and on occasion, the District Director. Given the tight response timeframes a teleconference may be preferred.

It is important to recognise Placement Agencies form a partnership with the Department in caring for children in the CEO's care and should be consulted and advised accordingly.

The initial planning meeting will consider:

- Immediate safety of child and or children.
- Clarification and summary of the concerns.
- What information is provided to the carer and by whom.
- What information is provided to the parents or significant others.

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<sup>3</sup> An approved carer is any person approved under Regulation 4(1) of the Children and Community Services Regulations 2006. Approved carers are recorded on the Foster Carer Directory.

- Police involvement if required<sup>4</sup>;
- Status of approval on the Foster Care Directory, depending on the nature of the allegation and until the assessment of the carer is complete the carer's status is recorded as under review.
- Safety of any other children with the carer, including their own children.
- Support to carer(s) and or agency.
- Who is to be provided with the plan.
- What reports or other information will be forthcoming.
- The carer interview.
- Progress reporting.
- Allocation of tasks.
- Timeframe for actions and review meeting.

This process provides an opportunity for carers and if appropriate, Placement Agencies to give their account in relation to any concerns. The carer may prefer a Placement Agency representative be present for support at interviews with the Department, however this is the carer's choice.

Both the SWA and the carer investigation should be completed within 30 days. The Placement Agency will be informed if there are any delays with this process. Both the Placement Agency and the carers will be advised of the outcome of the SWA and the carer investigation in writing.

At the conclusion of the assessment any future action should be discussed. This may include:

- Decisions and plans for the subject child or children.
- Placement Agency decisions in relation to the carer(s) or others concerned, based on the Department's recommendations.
- Status of approval on the Foster Carer Directory.
- Planning for any other children placed with the carer.
- Supports and training put in place for the carer.
- Other recommendations for the Placement Agency and/or the Department.

In the case of any disagreement, the Department's Complaints Management System will be followed. Details of this can be found at:  
<http://www.community.wa.gov.au/DCP/ContactUs/>

## **Departmental Response in relation to carers who are employees of the NGO**

### **Placement Agency Employees**

The use of employees to support children in care is the preferred model of operation for a number of Placement Agencies. Employees of Placement Agencies who are not approved under the *Children and Community Services Regulations 2006 Reg. 4(1)* are not included on the Foster Carer Directory.

Where there are concerns about a child in the CEOs care that meet the Department's threshold for harm the Department's District Office will undertake a Safety and Wellbeing Assessment inclusive of interviewing the carers.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 2 Western Australia Police Service Responsibilities regarding Child Protection Matters.

Placement Agency employees are not subject to a carer investigation by the Department's Duty of Care Unit. Assessment or review of the employee's competency to perform their duties is the responsibility of the employing Placement Agency<sup>5</sup> and should take into consideration the outcome and recommendations of the Safety and Wellbeing Assessment.

Key points of process where the person alleged responsible for harm is a Placement Agency employee are detailed below:

- The decision about how to classify the concerns (either as standard of care concern or safety and wellbeing concern in care) remains with the Department but the views of the Placement Agency workers should be taken into consideration as part of the decision making.
- Regardless of how the District intends to classify the concerns they must organise an initial planning meeting involving;
  - the case managers and team leaders for all of the children in the placement.
  - a representative from the Placement Agency (the Placement Agency will nominate an appropriate person).
  - any other relevant staff such as psychologists, education officers and so on.
- The purpose of the meeting is to ensure;
  - all parties are aware of, and have the same information about, the concerns.
  - the views of all parties are considered.
  - clear plans are developed to respond to the concerns.
  - appropriate plans are in place to keep the children safe and the carers safe from further allegations (including the perception that they have had the opportunity to influence the children in their disclosures).
  - the plan should also address how information will be shared with all of the key stakeholders.
- In relation to Safety and Wellbeing Concerns the District will undertake a SWA, **inclusive of interviewing the Placement Agency employees.**
- The SWA is the Department's investigation of the concerns and should be completed within 30 days. Placement Agencies must **not** be asked to conduct their own investigation of Safety and Wellbeing Concerns.
- Where multiple Districts are involved one District must take responsibility for co-ordinating the Department's response (inclusive of communication with the Placement Agency and interviewing the carers). Generally this would be the District that is first advised of the concern or disclosure.
- The Placement Agency may decide to instruct the employee to remain absent from the workplace as a result of the concerns. The Department must maximise its' effort to complete the SWA earlier than 30 days to minimise the impact on the employee and the Placement Agency.
- The Department must advise the Placement Agency of any decision to extend this timeframe.
- The outcome of all SWAs must be provided to the Placement Agency employee and the Placement Agency in writing.

Whether the Placement Agency operates a model using carers placed on the Foster Care Directory, employees or a combination of both the Department has final decision-making authority with regard to the placement of children in the CEOs care.

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<sup>5</sup> Placement Agencies assessment or review of the employee's competency to perform their duties is analogous to the DOCU carer investigation applied to foster carers on the Foster Carer Directory.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

#### Definitions<sup>6</sup>

##### Physical Abuse

Physical abuse occurs when a child has experienced severe and/or persistent ill-treatment through behaviours such as beating, shaking, inappropriate administration of alcohol and drugs, attempted suffocation or excessive discipline or physical punishment.

The harm experienced by a child as a result of these behaviours needs to be, or likely to be, detrimental in effect and significant in nature on the child's wellbeing. Harm that a child may experience as a result of physical abuse can include, but is not limited to, injuries such as cuts, bruises, burns, bites and fractures. The injury resulting from physical abuse is considered to be non-accidental.

##### Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse occurs when a child has been exposed or subjected to sexual behaviours that are exploitative and/or inappropriate to his/her age and developmental level. Examples include sexual penetration, inappropriate touching, exposure to sexual acts or pornographic materials, using the internet for grooming and soliciting children for sexual exploitation.

Harm which may result from sexual abuse includes significant emotional trauma, physical injury, infections and impaired emotional and psychological development. Consideration is given to contextual elements in determining if a situation is abusive, such as parental behaviours that enable child sexual abuse to occur or the role of coercion or unequal power in a relationship. This is particularly important in relation to sexual behaviour between children, where the children's respective ages, developmental level and the nature of the relationship are important considerations.

Sexual activities between young people are not considered as sexual abuse unless:

- it is non-consensual or there are concerns about the young person's capacity to give consent; or
- there are factors such as bribery, coercion, threats, exploitation or violence; the child has less power than the other person; there is significant disparity in the developmental function or maturity.

##### *Legislative inclusive definition of child sexual abuse*

Section 124A of the *Children and Community Services Amendment (Reporting Sexual Abuse of Children) Act 2008* provides the following inclusive definition of 'sexual abuse' to be reported by mandatory reporters (doctors, nurses and midwives, teachers and police).

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<sup>6</sup> Department for Child Protection Casework Practice Manual.

*'Sexual abuse', in relation to a child, includes sexual behaviour in circumstances where:*

- (a) the child is the subject of bribery, coercion, a threat, exploitation or violence; or*
- (b) the child has less power than another person involved in the behaviour; or*
- (c) there is a significant disparity in the developmental function or maturity of the child and another person involved in the behaviour.*

### **Emotional Abuse**

Emotional abuse is the sustained, repetitive, inappropriate, ill treatment of a child or young person through behaviours including threatening, belittling, teasing, humiliating, bullying, confusing, ignoring and inappropriate encouragement. The harm experienced by a child as a result of these behaviours needs to be, or likely to be, detrimental in effect and significant in nature on the child's wellbeing. Children who have been emotionally abused are likely to have a reduced capacity to experience a range of emotions, to express emotion appropriately and to modulate their emotional experience. Children who have been emotionally abused are likely to be fearful, withdrawn and/or resentful, distressed and despairing.

### **Psychological Abuse**

Psychological abuse is the sustained, repetitive, inappropriate, ill treatment of a child or young person through behaviours including threatening, isolating, neglecting, discrediting, misleading, disregarding, ignoring and inappropriate encouragement. Psychological abuse damages a child's intellectual faculties and processes, including intelligence, memory, recognition, perception, attention, imagination and moral development. The harm experienced needs to be assessed to be or likely to be detrimental in effect and significant in nature on the child's wellbeing. Children who have been psychologically abused are likely to feel worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered or only of value in meeting another's needs.

### **Neglect**

Section 28(1) of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* defines neglect of a child who is in need of protection as 'neglect includes failure by a child's parents to provide, arrange, or allow the provision of (a) adequate care for the child; or (b) effective medical, therapeutic or remedial treatment for the child'.

Neglect is when a child is not provided with adequate food or shelter, effective medical, therapeutic or remedial treatment, and/ or care, nurturance or supervision to a severe and/or persistent extent. The deliberate deprivation of a child's basic needs should be considered within the context of physical, emotional or psychological abuse. For a child to be considered in need of protection, the level of harm must be detrimental in effect and significant in nature to the child's wellbeing. This can be due to the refusal or inability of the child's parents or carers to respond appropriately resulting in significant, immediate or potential risk of harm.

Neglect can be further described on a continuum of episodic, reactive or chronic. It can also be categorised as:

- Physical neglect of basic needs and abandonment, including poor supervision, malnutrition and dehydration, exposure to infection through poor hygiene and medical neglect. This can lead to poor physical health, developmental delays, serious injury or death.
- Supervisory neglect can result in serious accidents or accidental deaths including drowning, gun accidents, choking, ingestion of pills or fires. Supervisory neglect of very young children is of particular concern because of their increased vulnerability.
- Emotional neglect consists of inadequate nurturance or affection, permitted maladaptive behaviour and other emotional neglect. This can lead to inappropriate self-soothing behaviours and aggression in children.
- Psychological neglect includes the lack of any emotional support and love, chronic inattention to the child, exposure to family and domestic violence or alcohol and drug abuse. Children who experience psychological neglect may show signs such as neurological impairment and high anxiety level.
- Educational neglect relates to permitted chronic truancy, failure to enrol and inattention to special educational needs. This can lead to cognitive, language and communication delays. However referrals are not usually accepted by the Department where educational neglect is the only concern. Consistent with the School Education Act 1999, schools are responsible for addressing nonattendance issues with families.

## Appendix 2

The Western Australia Police has the responsibility for investigating the following matters:

- sexual abuse of a child in an intra familial setting;
- sexual abuse of children by a person in authority (ie. includes teachers, police officers, foster carers, social workers, priests, youth workers, voluntary youth leaders, doctors etc );
- physical abuse in an intra familial setting;
- physical abuse of children by a person in authority (ie. includes teachers, police officers, foster carers, social workers, priests, youth workers, voluntary youth leaders, doctors etc);
- criminal neglect of a child where there is a disregard for responsibility of a parent/caregiver to provide the necessities of life
- assessment of paedophile offenders (includes multiple offender situations, paedophile networks, unknown offenders);
- assessment of all matters involving child pornography;
- assessment of child pornography matters in conjunction with other agencies;
- assessment of offences pursuant to the Commonwealth Crimes (Child Sex Tourism) Amendment Act;
- historic complaints relative to the above; and
- assessment of child abuse/paedophile matters as requested by an interstate or international law enforcement agency.

### Appendix 3

The carer competencies as described in the *Children and Community Services Regulations 2006*.

The individual

- Is able to provide care for a child in a way that promotes the wellbeing of the child, promotes the child's family and interpersonal relationships and protects the child from harm.
- Is able to provide a safe living environment for a child.
- Is able to work cooperatively with officers, a child's family and other people when providing care for a child.
- Is able to take responsibility for the development of his or her competency and skills as a carer.
- Is a person of good character and repute.
- A negative notice or an interim negative notice has not been issued to the individual under the *Working with Children (Criminal Record Checking Act) 2004*; or
- There are reasons for believing that the approval was obtained improperly.

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