



Roundtable into Preventing child sexual abuse in out-of-home care – Summary report

Background

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse held its first of a series of roundtables in Sydney on Wednesday 16 April 2014.

The roundtable was convened by Justice Jennifer Coate and Commissioner Robert Fitzgerald AM.

This roundtable discussion will help the Royal Commission better understand how to prevent sexual abuse of children in OOHC. With the number of children in OOHC increasing nationally, examining the prevention of child sexual abuse in this setting is a priority for the Royal Commission.

The roundtable followed the release of Issues Paper 4: Preventing Sexual Abuse of Children in Out of Home Care, which generated 63 submissions from a wide range of individuals and organisations. Some consistent themes emerged in the submissions and these formed the basis of the roundtable discussion. The four broad themes for discussion were:

- Monitoring and oversight
- Recruitment, assessment and training of carers
- Prevention through practice
- Supporting and responding to children in OOHC

Participants were asked specific questions by the Commissioners to guide the discussion. The questions were targeted to enhance our understanding of the current OOHC landscape and identify the areas that require greater focus.

Discussion summary

Below is an outline of the discussion.

Session 1: Monitoring and Oversight

Questions

The benefits of independent oversight of investigations into allegations of sexual abuse of children in out of home care have been highlighted in our submissions process. This approach is currently in place in NSW. What are the benefits, risks and costs of this approach and are there any issues preventing the adoption of this work in other jurisdictions?

The development of a national register of foster carers (and others who are in the foster carer's home) has been identified as a way of setting some minimum information that can be shared across jurisdictions. What are the barriers and enablers to effective implementation of a national register?

Synopsis

Each state and territory has a different approach to the monitoring of agencies to ensure they provide adequate care and investigate allegations of abuse. Monitoring and oversight of OOHC is not only important to prevent sexual abuse, but also to ensure sexual abuse is identified, reported and appropriately responded to if it does occur.

Key issues

To open the discussion, Steve Kinmond (Deputy NSW Ombudsman) gave a presentation on the role of the NSW Ombudsman in oversighting investigations of allegations of sexual abuse by agencies and organisations, with a particular focus on the outcomes and costs of the scheme.

The key issues that were explored in this session were:

- The diversity of oversight and monitoring models across states and territories
- Emerging issues regarding information exchange and cross-organisation collaboration
- Balancing the 'bureaucratisation' of care and service delivery
- The positives and negatives of a national register of carers
- Whether there should be consistent national standards for government and non-government OOHC providers to meet to be accredited, registered, licensed, or granted a service agreement

Session 2: Recruitment, Assessment and Training of Carers

Questions

What more is needed in the recruitment, training and monitoring of carers to adequately prevent the risk of sexual abuse of children in OOHC? For example what are effective ways to support carers providing placements for highly vulnerable children with a history of sexual abuse?

Synopsis

Each state and territory has requirements that applicants must meet before they can become carers. This is to ensure carers are suitably placed and able to care for and protect a child from harm, and will not pose any further risk to the child placed in their care.

In most states and territories, carers are approved by the department, however in New South Wales and Victoria, carers may be approved by the relevant OOHC organisation. Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory allow non-government organisations to assess, but not approve carer applicants.

Key issues

To commence discussion on this topic, Sandie de Wolf (Berry Street, Victoria) gave an overview of that organisation's work in the area of recruitment, training and support of carers, focusing on applying the therapeutic care model to foster care and the challenges faced in recruiting new foster carers.

The key issues that were explored in this session were:

- The advantages and detriments of professionalising of foster care
- How best to support kinship carers as a growing carer group
- The changing demographic of carers and why carers leave the OOHC system
- The adequacy of training and support for carers in identifying warning signs of sexual abuse, supporting children through disclosures, coping with and managing children's sexually abusive behaviours
- How best to prevent potential perpetrators from becoming a carer
- The risks and benefits of pre-employment screening, assessment and monitoring of the suitability of carers and carers' households

Session 3: Prevention through Practice

Question

What is the most effective way to systemically implement and monitor the role of caseworkers?

Synopsis

Vulnerable children are over represented in OOHC. Children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, children in residential care, children with a disability and children with sexualised behaviour or a history of sexual abuse are at an increased risk of abuse.

Key issues

Discussion opened with Deidre Cheers (CatholicCare Broken Bay) providing a perspective about the necessity for consistency in the use of case management systems, qualifications and national data collection to promote continuity of relationship for children in out of home care.

The key issues that were explored in this session were:

- Are current casework models delivering the best outcomes for child safety
- How best to ensure children have opportunities for disclosing abuse, such as a quality relationship with at least one trusted adult.
- The risks and benefits of changing qualification requirements for carers and approaches to retain and support caseworkers
- How to create child friendly environments and processes and facilitate cultural change in attitudes towards children in OOHC organisations and the wider community
- Ensuring children are in safe placements, in particular by ensuring that the Aboriginal child placement principle is followed
- Protecting children in emergency placements

Session 4: Supporting and Responding to Children in OOHC\

Question

What processes are necessary to ensure there is adequate support for a child that is the subject of reported abuse or after disclosure?

Synopsis

Many of the submissions received in response to Issues Paper 4: Preventing Sexual Abuse of Children in Out of Home Care suggest a supportive child friendly environment where children feel safe to disclose is critical to their ongoing protection. However significant cultural change, as well as training and support from OOHC providers is needed to achieve this.

Key issues

Jacqui Reed (CREATE foundation) provided a snap shot of children and young people's views about how they disclose and when they feel unsafe to disclose. The theme of adults needing to better understand children's communication styles to 'tune in' to disclosures was also explored.

The key issues that were explored in this session were:

- Identifying barriers to disclosures, supporting children to disclose by giving them language, understanding behaviours as disclosures of abuse, and creating safety plans
- Empowering children by engaging with social media and technology
- Current OOHC approaches and responses to disclosure which break down the barriers of silence, secrecy, shame and the stigmatising of behaviour
- How agencies and services are working together through colocation, using interagency agreements to share information, and readily respond to disclosures
- Identifying risks and providing support for children as they transition from adolescence to young adulthood and exit the OOHC system
- The effectiveness of the National Framework and National Standards