

Select Committee on Child Protection, Tasmania

2010 – 2011

URL: <https://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/committees/historicalcommittees/house-of-assembly-select-committee-on-child-protection>

Details

The Select Committee on Child Protection was set up in October 2010 and reported in 2011. It found that the child protection system was under 'serious stress' and that as a result, children were not receiving the care and protection that they needed. The situation was not caused by child protection workers, who did a good job under considerable pressure, but by problems within the culture and organisation of the Department of Health and Human Services.

The Select Committee was set up following considerable publicity and concern about the situation of one state ward. This led to a debate in the Parliament about the problems with the child protection system and how to deal with them.

The Report of the Committee depicted an over burdened system with 20,000 notifications and nearly 1000 children in state care during 2010. It received evidence that the current child welfare system was 'unsustainable' and unable to meet demand. Even though there had been 12 reports since 2005, followed by reforms, change had not taken place. Many of these reports had made similar recommendations.

Evidence was provided that despite reforms, children are falling through the gaps, serious notifications are not acted upon, children are being sent back into an abusive environment, and files are closed prematurely to improve statistics.

The Committee emphasised that child protection workers did a 'good job' even though they had huge workloads and worked in a 'highly stressful and unpredictable environment'.

The problems included:

- A system that was 'defensive, risk averse and secretive' with families, foster carers, and other stakeholders. There was a lack of consistency with families.
- The low morale of employees.
- Not enough funding for child protection and support services.
- Failing to respond to notifications fast enough and a tendency to not believe children who reported their own abuse and neglect.
- Not matching children with carers. This meant that placements broke down more often so that children suffered 'cumulative harm' from multiple placements. Children also needed consistency in school, therapy, and other support services. The Committee pointed out that babies in particular should not be placed with a 'succession'

- of foster carers. Too many brothers and sisters were split and kinship carers were not used enough.
- Children not getting enough access to parents and siblings.
 - Foster carers not being given vital information about children, not feeling heard, and not receiving prompt remuneration for their expenses.
 - Children being returned to parents before the problems that led to their removal had been solved. Some parents were trying to make changes but did not receive any support. Parents needed a voice. Family group conferencing was the best way of doing this but it was not used enough.
 - Inadequate complaints mechanisms.
 - Some sections of the government had tried to limit the powers of the Children's Commissioner by, for instance, refusing the office access to vital information.

The Committee found that the key areas to address were:

- Increased cooperation with support services. These included child and adolescent mental health services, drug and alcohol services for adolescents and adults, child trauma services, sexual assault support services, family violence counselling, and child health services.
- Adequate funding and accessibility of support services, including in rural areas.
- Provision of a secure unit for children and adolescents.
- Identifying and dealing with problems early.
- Placing a strong emphasis on prevention.
- Placing more emphasis on supporting families.
- Providing more professional development for workers.
- Attracting and keeping the right workers.
- Improving communication with children, families, foster parents and other stakeholders.
- Making sure children's assessments included their physical, psychological, developmental, and educational situations.
- Providing a variety of placements.
- 'The breaking of generational cycles of poverty, hopelessness, social and educational isolation and disadvantage'.

The Committee suggested that the best way of doing this was to adopt the Public Health Model recommended by the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. The Public Health Model aimed to prevent child abuse and neglect by offering the right level of support to families. This support had three stages. The first, known as primary intervention, meant services that were available to all families. The next, secondary intervention, required more specialised services, such as counselling. The third and final stage was tertiary intervention which involved the removal of the child. Such an approach could reduce the numbers of notifications and children coming into care. This would ease the workload and be better for the children and their families. The Committee pointed out that this model required adequate funding.

The Committee also recommended increased powers for the Children's Commissioner, legal aid for parents facing the removal of their children, and a review of the *Children, Young Persons and their Families Act*. In particular, it was critical of the crisis driven approach of the Act which meant that child protection workers tended to deal with an immediate crisis rather than consider the overall situation of the family and the number of notifications received about a child. This led to short term solutions and did nothing to prevent cumulative harm.

More info

Related Entries

Related Events

- [Inquiry by the Auditor-General into Out of Home Care, Tasmania \(2011 - 2012\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Department of Health and Human Services, State of Tasmania \(1998 - 2018\)](#)

- [Commissioner for Children \(c. 2000 - current\)](#)
- [National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children \(2009 - current\)](#)

The Select Committee on Child Protection draws on the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children.

Related Legislation

- [Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997, Tasmania \(2000 - current\)](#)

Resources

- [Protecting children is everybody's business: national framework for protecting Australia's children, 2009-2020, 2009](#)

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