

# Keep Them Safe

## A shared approach to child wellbeing

*Keep them Safe* sets out the NSW Government's five year Plan to improve the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. It was developed in response to the Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW that was conducted by the Hon James Wood AO QC during 2008.

The Plan sets out a new direction backed by evidence-based strategies to dramatically change the way children and families are supported and protected. The Plan includes a Government response to each of the Inquiry's 111 recommendations.

The Plan recognises that caring and supporting children is first and foremost the responsibility of parents, families and communities. When Government support becomes necessary, child protection is not the sole responsibility of the Department of Community Services but a collective responsibility.

The Action Plan recognises the need to address the underlying factors that lead to abuse and neglect such as poverty, isolation, domestic violence, mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse. The Plan also recognises that we need to get help to families earlier so they do not escalate into the statutory child protection system.

The goal of the Action Plan is that *all children in NSW are healthy, happy and safe, and grow up belonging in families and communities where they have opportunities to reach their full potential.*

Key measures in the Action Plan are

### **Raising the threshold for reporting children at risk of harm**

In NSW, police, teachers, health workers and other people who work with children are required by law to notify the Department of Community Services' Helpline when they have reasonable grounds to suspect children are at 'risk of harm'. These professionals are known as 'mandatory reporters'. Justice Wood found NSW had one of the lowest thresholds for reporting in Australia and that the Helpline was being swamped by reports about children who, while not receiving ideal care and whose families were in need of support, did not require intervention by the State.

To implement Justice Wood's recommendation, the threshold for matters reported to the Helpline will be

increased to 'risk of significant harm', commencing January 2010. This change will allow the Department of Community Services to focus its resources on those children and families who need a statutory response. It will also allow families who need other help and services to get the right supports sooner, without having to be reported to the Department.

### **New model to link families with support services earlier**

The Government will establish specialist Child Wellbeing Units in Area Health Services and the Westmead Children's Hospital, NSW Police, the Department of Education and Training, Housing NSW, the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care and the Department of Juvenile Justice.

These units will help agencies identify at risk children and respond to the needs of children at the local level, resulting in more families receiving earlier support. This will replace the current system in which all matters concerning children at risk of harm are reported to the Department of Community Services. Justice Wood found that many of these less serious matters could be dealt with by a Government agency in partnership with community organisations.

The units will be established before the new reporting threshold comes into effect and staff will be trained and supported in how to work in the new system. The units will

- advise, support and educate mandatory reporters regarding whether cases meet the threshold of 'significant harm' and report matters to the Department of Community Services Helpline
- where cases do not meet the new threshold, identify help that could be provided either by the government department or other services in the local community to assist the child or family
- promote a gradual cultural change towards a shared responsibility for the support and protection of children, and a partnership approach both between government agencies, and with non-government partners
- drive better alignment and coordination of agency service systems over time.

A tool will be developed to help front line workers determine whether a report meets the new threshold. This tool will form part of a common assessment framework for all agencies working with children, young people and families.

### **Expanded services and a focus on prevention and early intervention**

The Government believes a greater focus on prevention and early intervention is essential to reducing the number of reports of children at risk. The Action Plan sets out new or expanded services to enable more families to receive support. These include

- extending the *Brighter Futures* early intervention program to support vulnerable families with children aged 0-8 by providing access to a range of services, including quality child care, case management, parenting program and home visiting
- extending intensive family preservation services to support families whose children are at risk of entering out-of-home care
- establishing Regional Intake and Referral Services to help link families and children to services in their local area – three services will be established in 2009/10, with further services to be put in place from 2012/13
- continuing to trial Sustained Health Home Visiting, with further expansion to be considered in 2010, which employs specialist child and family health nurses to work intensively with high needs families in pregnancy and in the first two years of a child's life
- an additional 25 Home School Liaison Officers will be established to work with families where there are concerns about non-attendance at school.

### **Creating a new partnership with the non government sector**

The non government sector is essential to supporting families and children, and the Action Plan includes new measures to develop stronger partnerships with the sector, including an enhanced role for the non government sector in providing child and family services.

- The Government will fund non government organisations or local councils to establish Regional Intake and Referral services. These organisations will work with the new Child Wellbeing Units to improve access to services for children and families. In 2009, three initial Regional Intake and Referral services will be established.
- The Government will enhance the role of the non government sector in the delivery of out-of-home care. Growth funding in the *Brighter Futures* early intervention program will be allocated to the non-government sector and further decisions about the program will be made following the completion of an evaluation in 2010.
- The Government will invest in capacity building and reform of funding arrangements.

In particular, the Government will work with Aboriginal communities and organisations to support communities to address the unacceptable over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection system. The Government will also work with Aboriginal organisations to build their capacity to play an enhanced role in the provision of out-of-home care and other services.

### **Cultural change**

Implementing these reforms will involve a major change in culture and a new mindset. The aim of the Action Plan is to encourage parents, communities, non government organisations and government agencies to work together to support children and families at a local level.

This is a long term endeavour, and the Action Plan takes a staged approach to implementing the reforms. There are also specific strategies to promote cultural change.

- The new Child Wellbeing Units will act as change agents, providing training, support and advice to staff within their own agencies. They will also provide an interagency network to enable agencies to better communicate with one another and coordinate their efforts to support children and families.
- Legislative changes and information systems will be put in place to allow agencies to share critical information and work together. Agencies will also undertake joint training.

### **Implementing the Plan**

The implementation of the actions in the Plan will be closely monitored, and an Implementation Unit within the Department of Premier and Cabinet will continue for at least 12 months to coordinate and monitor the implementation of the Plan, and a Senior Officers Group will be established to drive implementation within agencies. The Department of Premier and Cabinet will publicly report on progress against the Action Plan annually.

The Government will ensure that the design and delivery of services and initiatives under the Plan is informed by contemporary research and evidence based practice and delivered in a targeted and effective manner to make sure they achieve outcomes for children.

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