

NEWSLETTER

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The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People advocates for and promotes the best interests of young people and children under the care of the Minister for Families and Communities.

A home loan for care leavers

As part of Government's commitment to ensuring that children who are under the guardianship of the Minister have priority access to services we have been working with Homestart on the development of a home loan product for care leavers.

We expected that there were barriers or obstacles to people who had been under guardianship getting a standard home loan. This was confirmed in focus groups held in July.

The first focus group was of young people who had been under guardianship. They were asked about their accommodation, financial history, their aspirations for home ownership and their opinion on three potential home loan products.

The second group comprised financial counsellors and workers from Children Youth and Family Services and the non-government sector. Both groups came to similar conclusions on the type of product that might be suitable.

The barriers included low incomes, inexperience at budgeting for a home loan, no families to turn to for financial help and reluctance of financial institutions to lend. The young people though were familiar with what was required in meeting loan repayments.

We continue to work with Homestart on a product that takes into account the issues raised.

For more information on the Homestart Home Loan Product, contact Angela Andary on 8226 8570 or andary.angela@saugov.sa.gov.au



Pam Simmons
Guardian

Letter from the Guardian for Children and Young People

At the time of writing this letter a Bill is being debated in Parliament that will give legislative weight to the commitments made in *Keeping Them Safe*, the Government's child protection reform program. The Government Bill is to amend the 1993 *Children's Protection Act* in some important ways.

The changes include reinforcing or adding:

- Shared responsibility for the care and protection of children where the community as a whole takes a greater part in rearing and protecting children.
- Adding 'at risk of harm' to the reasons for child protection intervention, rather than requiring evidence of harm.
- The wellbeing and best interests of the child will over-ride other considerations, including the importance of family life, putting the child clearly at the centre of our decisions and actions.
- Strengthening our obligation to consider the child's views about matters affecting her or him.
- Emphasising the child's right to safety, security and stability in their family, or where that cannot be provided, in alternative care.
- Recognition that young people in detention centres (for offending or on remand) require a protective response from our system.
- New obligations on all organisations providing services to children to develop and maintain environments which are safe for children.
- Improved advice, review and accountability in the appointment of a Council for the Care of Children, a Guardian, and a Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee.

These changes were sought by the many people we talked to as part of our consultation. Other changes were proposed but require more debate.

On enactment of the Bill the challenge shifts to all of us in its implementation. Some of the big tests come in providing an alternative care system that does give stability to children, making the participation of children meaningful, transforming our organisations so that they are child-focused, responding positively to new accountability measures, and finding the capacity to respond to more children and young people needing our attention.

From our Office's view of the world one of the deepest challenges lies in deciding what is in the best interests of the child. This ground is one of the most contested I have witnessed and here we are in the thick of it. I have yet to come across the person who doesn't think they are acting in the best interests of the child when advocating for a particular decision – and that is reassuring. But how then do good decisions get made by the responsible guardians? There are guidelines in the Bill, in the form of principles, and these should underpin any decision.

However, the process of arriving at the decision can be as tortuous as the justification for the decision. The guardian needs to take into account the views of the child – after taking into account his or her capacity to form and express those views – the views of others who are significant to the child, the views of others more experienced than themselves or with a different interaction with the child such as the school, the views of legal bodies such as the courts, and the views of the child's cultural community. Then the guardian has to apply what they know about child development and consider the immediate needs of the child together with what may be in their

The Office of the Guardian works to improve services to children in care, promote and protect the rights of children and to strengthen their voice.

longer term interests. And throughout this, the child is entitled to have her or his privacy respected.

Is it any wonder the delegated statutory guardians, the CYFS caseworkers, find this tough going? Their professionalism also requires them to examine their own values and beliefs in reaching any decision on behalf of the child.

I understand then why there is some anxiety and reservation about the introduction of the Office of the Guardian. Here is another body that can review, but not overturn, their difficult decisions. Our hope though is that our presence becomes a reassurance rather than a threat, where, if needed, weighty decisions can be sifted through a second filter and fresh eyes brought to often cloudy circumstances. Time will tell but our intention is to share the responsibility for deciding best interests.

Pam Simmons, Guardian for Children and Young People

What's been done?

June 2005 – August 2005

One of the many joys of our work is meeting some of the children and young people who are under the guardianship of the Minister. Their achievements and strengths are inspiring to us and, no doubt, to you. We have joined several school holiday events, the graduation of Mission B young people, an 18th birthday party, afternoon tea with the Minister at Parliament House, graduation of the first group in the Bicycle SA program and a focus group on home ownership. We are also fortunate to have two young people assisting us with projects in the Office.

This quarter sees the completion of the first part of the training program for all schools on child protection, individual education plans and children under guardianship. Our Office participated in this program. In August the individual education plan training of social workers and alternative care workers and carers commences and we again join CYFS and the Education Department in this series.

Our Services Bank project, to promote preferential access to services and products for children under guardianship, has focused this quarter on tickets to events, a home loan product with Homestart for people who have been in care [see p 1], access to Commonwealth Rehabilitation Services (CRS Australia) and bursaries at independent schools. More on this later.

The consultation on the Charter of Rights for children and young people in care is underway. We are learning a lot from the workshops but we're not sure about including the 'right to wag school' in the Charter.

We have made presentations to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Northern Region), the Ministerial Youth Council, Child Protection Services (Southern Region), Helen Mayo House at Glenside Campus and the SA Branch of the Australian Association of Social Workers.

Our work on investigating how to prevent sexual abuse in care is nearing completion and we have benefited enormously from the wisdom of our 'group of experts' on this topic. We prepared a response to the *Children's Protection (Keeping Them Safe) Amendment Bill* and we have joined the newly created Inter-Ministerial Committee on Child Development.

We have moved, [see p 5] and check out our website at www.gcyp.sa.gov.au.

Help to join the workforce

Did you know that the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service (CRS Australia) can assist young people from age 14 to get a job?

CRS Australia delivers vocational rehabilitation services to people who have an injury, disability or health condition. The service is free to those receiving income support payments from Centrelink or who are financially dependent on others.

In a recent pilot program in Northern Adelaide young people under Guardianship were a priority as part of improving access for young people to CRS Australia services.

Nigel Knowles and Clare Pattison, Rehabilitation Consultants at Salisbury, were specialist youth consultants who developed partnerships with local agencies to provide a more intensive service to young people, including those under Guardianship.

“Many of the younger people we see haven’t had a job before so a big part of what we do is to identify some job options,” said Nigel.

“Experience in the workplace is also really important. We can support them in finding work training placements and meet with them regularly to make sure things are working out.

“Depending on the job, more formal training may be needed, such as a TAFE course. CRS can pay a travel allowance and a work or formal training allowance.

“We can also help young people in completing education by accompanying them through the school re-enrolment requirements or linking them to numeracy and literacy courses. CRS will also provide therapeutic psychologist services where required although this is not unlimited.

“They don’t need to have a specific job in mind but they do need to be at the point where they are ready to join the workforce. We can work with young people over several months or longer and stay involved for at least three months after they get a job.”

While the pilot concluded in July, regular CRS services are available to young people under Guardianship who have an injury or a disability or a mental health problem including depression, anxiety or traumatic stress.

CRS provides:

- Assessments to identify vocational goals and barriers;
- Individualised rehabilitation programs to overcome barriers;
- Specialised job skills development, matching and placement; and
- Personal and career counselling.

Marion CYFS have met with their local CRS office to ensure ready access to services for young people under Guardianship and to help resolve any problems as they arise. In the next few months the Guardian for Children and Young People will talk with CRS rehabilitation consultants and managers about improved access to young people under Guardianship.

For contact with your local CRS office ring 1800 624 824.

Website

The first stage of our website is now complete and can be accessed at www.gcyp.sa.gov.au. With children and young people as our target audience we have endeavoured to make the site as child and user friendly as possible. The site contains a Kids Only section and explains the role of the office, how they can contact us, what to do if they have a complaint, who to talk to if they have a problem and links to other websites on topics such as health, sports, science and music.

Other pages provide information to adults on topics such as our role in annual reviews and updates on our project activity. We have a dedicated news section and if there are programs or information that you would like children and young people under the Guardianship of the Minister to know about let us know. Please e-mail any information to gcyp@saugov.sa.gov.au.

Accommodation

We are now in our permanent “home” and have quickly settled in to our new surroundings. The Office of the Guardian is at:

Level 4, 50 Grenfell Street (cnr Gawler Place and Grenfell Streets)

Ph: 8226 8570

Fax: 8226 8577

e-mail: gcyp@saugov.sa.gov.au

For those of you who have yet to have the “OoG” (Office of the Guardian) experience, please feel free to call in– the kettle is always on.

We believe that children and young people in the care of the Minister can have the best services, be safe, well cared for and have their views heard and acted on.



Mellita Kimber
Youth Advisor

Introducing Mellita Kimber Youth Advisor

Hi! My name is Mellita Kimber and I work, on a very part-time basis (half a day a week) as a Youth Advisor for the Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (OoG). Some of the projects that I am currently working on at the moment are:

- A collaborative project to send out Christmas cards to children and young people under Guardianship of the Minister;
- Researching a new Homestart product to benefit those who were under the Guardianship of the Minister;
- The Charter of Rights for children and young people in care; and
- Attending the Face to Face Fourth National Partnership Forum on 'The Superhero's Journey' supporting Positive Leaving Care & Transition Experience'.

I am very happy that I have been given the opportunity to work for OoG, as I was under the care of the Guardianship of the Minister until I turned 18 years old. This has given me insight into how fragile the system is, yet how vital it is to have a system that works. It has been through my experiences and developing friendships with other children and young people who have had similar upbringings that I have developed a dream to:

- Improve the quality of services, safety and care experienced by children and young people living under the Guardianship of the Minister;
- To promote a sense of pride and self confidence in the achievement of children and young people who have been involved in the system, whether that experience is positive or negative; and
- To seek recognition of efforts of unsung heroes who volunteer countless hours to achieving similar outcomes.

The rest of my week is spent working as an assistant to the Director of the Chief Executive's Office in the Department of Health. I thoroughly enjoy my work within this office as I work with a fun, friendly and dynamic group of people, particularly my boss, Ingrid Haythorpe, who shows appreciation, inspires confidence and promotes initiative, not only for my work but my shopping sprees!!!!

Personally I aspire to own, or maybe more realistically holiday in, a beachfront hut off the coast of Thailand where I can drink fruit cocktails, pig out on the delicious Thai food and relax with my close girlfriends but until my love of clothes (particularly pink tops) and countless accessories abates this will remain just... a day dream.