

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.

Audits of Annual Reviews

Since April 2005 this Office has monitored the wellbeing of children and young people in care by attending their Annual Reviews. The law requires that each year a panel must review the exiting care and protection arrangements to ensure that they are in the best interests of the child. The renewed commitment to quality outcomes for children and young people under guardianship means that these Annual Reviews are also seen as an important means of monitoring the quality of services and outcomes for the child. Our involvement allows for another level of independent external accountability. It has also provided the opportunity for us to monitor some of the more recent initiatives for children and young people in care; for example, Individual Education Plans and priority access to services. Most importantly, we have been interested in how the voice of children or young people has been incorporated into decision making.

We attend at least six reviews each quarter which are arranged directly with the relevant District Centre Manager. As at November 2006, we had visited 13 District Centres and sat in on 47 reviews.

We have found a strong commitment from staff in the District Centres to the Annual Review process but there is some variation in how reviews are conducted. Some District Centres invite only professionals or case workers but we have been encouraged to see some others inviting comment from the child or young person, their carer and other important people in their lives as well as other agencies. This allows other agencies to not only understand the complexity of the work, but also encourages a shared responsibility for the outcomes for children and young people.

The audit has confirmed for us the importance to the child of an excellent long term relationship with a social worker. The outcomes for children in these circumstances were notably better and if this was combined with a stable long term placement, the issues for the child or young person were minimal. Where there was a frequent change of worker, the lack of continuity often meant that workers were not aware of the child's history, including the reasons they came into care, the importance of developing or maintaining cultural connections, sibling access and health care issues. Lacking this information, a worker is less able to see events in context and respond appropriately and more likely to react as if it were a crisis.

Conducting audits of Annual Reviews has enabled us to learn more about the circumstances of individual children, build relationships with District Centres, provide some independent scrutiny of cases and to advocate for systems changes.

For the next 12 months we will refine our audit form, apply more rigour to the process and provide more structured feedback to the District Centres.

For more information on the audit of Annual Reviews contact, Angela Andary on 8226 8571 or email on andary.angela@saugov.sa.gov.au

*Angela Andary,
Senior Project Officer*



Pam Simmons
Guardian

Letter from the Guardian for Children and Young People

The start of a new year brings renewed energy and resolve. At our annual planning day we resolved to strengthen our monitoring role, to emphasise the voice of children and young people, check our independence of thought and action and keep focused on systemic reform. We are very fortunate in our work to have the support and generosity of the major child protection and child welfare agencies.

I was reminded of this while undertaking the annual field consultation in late 2006. The field consultation is part of our monitoring role to hear from workers who provide services to children and young people in care. I seek their views on how well the care system works for children and young people. Consultation sessions were held with 38 agencies across the state.

The participants were generous with their time, thoughts, experience and knowledge. The ongoing positive impact of the *Keeping Them Safe* reform program and the associated *Rapid Response* commitment is evident in reports of improved access to services such as therapy, housing assistance, disability services and vocational training. It is also evident in enhanced cooperation between agencies and workers in health, education and family welfare.

The introduction of the Individual Education Plans has led to improved cooperation between schools and Families SA district centres. It has been a year of “muddling through”, as one social worker put it, to get the plans completed.

If I could sum up the feeling I would say there is heightened optimism for children and young people in care. That may sound trite because we know what an uphill battle it often is to get what any one child needs, and how many more obstacles they have to negotiate before achieving what their age peers take for granted.

There is still a high level of exasperation about the quantity, quality and support of placements for children. In that we are not alone. Our colleagues interstate and overseas also struggle to get alternative care placements suited to the needs of each child. In the 1980s and 1990s in South Australia we watched an alternative care system, increasingly and overwhelmingly dependent on foster care, try to swim against the tide of household change. Forecasting would have told us that the number of available voluntary foster carers was likely to stagnate at best. This is all easy to say with hindsight. However it underscores the importance of the alternative care action plan in development now and in future funding commitments that put us at least on a national par.

On a positive note, significant improvements were reported in the relationships between District Centres, alternative care agencies and carers, and recent better attention given to supporting relative carers. The general view though is that there is still a way to go in achieving inclusive care teams or care families.

There is also work to be done in clarifying the responsibility social workers have in developing and maintaining Aboriginal community connection and assisting them to do so. Similarly there is slow progress overall in involving children and young people in decisions about their lives despite best intentions.

As with any summary of a consultation of over 250 participants this skims the surface of what I heard and what was reported. It will not adequately reflect the huge effort made by workers and carers to do their best by the children they have responsibility for. There were such rich stories told, some which pointed to gaps in our care and in our workforce, and others to the ingenuity of people in bridging the gaps.

Pam Simmons, Guardian for Children and Young People

What's been done

December 2006 – February 2007

If you have not received a copy of the 2005-06 annual report you can access it from our website www.gcyp.sa.gov.au then follow the links Publications\ Annual Reports or you can request a printed copy from the office. The report contains information about our activities and the issues on which we have reported throughout the year, as well as details about the operations of the Office. The public document was released in December following the tabling of the report in Parliament on 21st November.

We are pleased to report that over the past three months another five agencies have endorsed the *Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care*. This brings the total of government and NGO agency endorsements to 18. The five new endorsees are: UnitingCare Wesley Port Adelaide, Life Without Barriers, St Johns Youth Services, SHINE (SA) and Mission Australia. The Charter of Rights Implementation Committee met again on 6 February and has turned its attention to monitoring compliance.

There is continuing interest in the 'being in care' information for children. The material was written by young people in care with what they wanted to tell other children and young people in care. The booklet describes in simple language such things as what being in care means, court orders and guardianship, who the important people are, what a contacts card is, children's rights and what to do if things don't go well. If you haven't seen it yet, view it on our website (www.gcyp.sa.gov.au Publications\ About Being in Care). The material is free for children and young people in care.

The Guardian conducted the third field consultation from September to December 2006. (See page 2) The consultation included over 250 workers who provide services to children and young people in care.

The Office has completed a review of its monitoring and reporting activities and a new monitoring framework draft will be exposed to consultation at the end of February. The new framework will closely reflect the priorities of children and young people in care as expressed in their *Charter of Rights* and will be a way of coordinating and integrating the various monitoring activities undertaken by the Office. The new framework is also intended to be a monitoring and development tool for other agencies working with children in care.



Receiving a certificate celebrating Baptist Community Services' endorsement of the Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care from Guardian Pam Simmons (centre) are Board Chair David Egarr (left) and Executive Director Mairi Walker.

Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care

Right #1
Being treated like other children and young people who do not live in care

Regency Park to the Red Centre

In October 2006, seven residents of the Regency Park Community Unit aged from 11 to 16 took an eight day adventure holiday to Uluru and Australia's red centre accompanied by several staff. We will let the pictures and the words of those involved, speak for themselves.

It was fun and challenging but it was still good. It was scary climbing Kings Canyon... Some of the resorts were perfect. At Ayers Rock resort we ate at a good restaurant... I had emu, kangaroo, croc, noodles and cake. The food was perfect and the staff were good to us.
MW 13 years



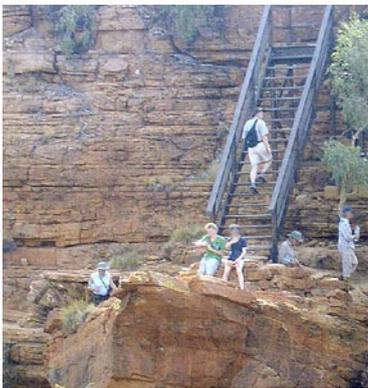
Best I liked climbing Ayers Rock. I can't believe I made it. I was exhausted.
M 11 years



Also, staying at the motel was fun. [two other boys] and I got the best room. We had two swimming pools.
J 14 years

I had my 16th birthday while we were playing at the Rock. They surprised me at the restaurant and even had a cake made for me by the cooks at the place we stayed. Can we do it again for my 17th birthday?
A 16 years





The big trip to Ayers Rock is the sort of thing that kids do with their parents so why not the Minister's kids?

It was a fantastic experience for the boys and it built up some strong bonds with the staff who went.

There was a buzz around the Unit that lasted for weeks after.

*David Holmes
Acting Manager, Community Residential Care*

The underground motel was so excellent. The dormitories were so brilliant... It's more like a bat cave underground.

...we visited Palm Valley on the four wheel drive track... Next thing we walked all the way to Palm Valley on another dirt track. We all reached the end of the valley but instead of going back the same way we have all taken the stairs up the steep rock hill. We all did a terrific job at making it back to the four wheel drives. We all deserved a 'great job' doing the walk to Palm Valley and back to where we came.

The food [at Uluru] looked delicious. I enjoyed eating the food. The types of food I liked were roast pork, smoked fish, chicken, damper and the dessert.

MR

It was a great experience which I won't forget and hopefully I will go back one day.

J2 15 years

CREATE Foundation

The Office of the Guardian has always enjoyed a warm and active relationship with CREATE, regularly taking its views on matters concerning children and young people in care and recently working together to make the Guardian's Youth Parliament team such a success.

Established in 1993 the Australian Association of Young People In Care (AAYPIC) was the first-ever voice of children and young people in care and to effect changes in the care system. In July 1999 AAYPIC became CREATE Foundation, a national not-for-profit organisation that creates opportunities with and for children and young people in care.

Its office in the Torrens Building in Victoria Square houses Coordinator Lea Spaven who joined the crew in July 2006. Alongside her, is new Community Facilitator, Trish Hardy, who started in September 2006 and the CREATE National Programs Manager, Emma Pursche who is based in the SA office.

In what Coordinator Lea Spaven describes as 'an extreme makeover' the new team will provide a fresh outlook to CREATE'S vision and introduce exciting new training programs.

'In 2007 we will be rolling out **mission:be** in the Southern and Northern Metropolitan regions. This is a leadership, learning, team building, goal setting and action planning program for young people in care aged 14 – 18 years.

'This is a module-based program delivered over a six month period with three months focusing on community development and three months of one-day workshops, weekend residential programs and community activities.

'In successfully completing this training program, participants also qualify to receive the Duke of Edinburgh award,' she says.

Lea explains how CREATE encourages young people to become involved within the organisation, through Young Consultants Training.

'Young Consultant's training aims to turn young people into confident members of the community as well as encouraging a stronger connection to CREATE and possible future opportunities. Young Consultants Training is a three day training program which is offered at various times throughout the year.

'After this, trained 'Young Consultants' are then supported to participate in policy development, training, research, projects and group facilitation activities.

'CREATE Young Consultants have trained departmental case workers, discussed their experiences at parliamentary inquiries, and given speeches at conferences and public events.' she explains.

Lea's small team of staff and young volunteers also contribute to improving the care system through policy advice, project management and delivery, research, training and group consultation with children and young people. Consulting services are delivered by project teams of trained Young Consultants, CREATE staff and external experts as required.

People wanting to know more about CREATE should check out the website at www.create.org.au, write to GPO Box 513 Adelaide SA 5001 or phone (08) 8226 1366.

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Creating Opportunities for Children & Young People in Care