



# Guardian's 2014 Consultation with Service Providers

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From July to September 2014, the Guardian convened workshops in urban and regional South Australia to discuss the findings from the 2013 inquiry about children's experiences of moving while in care and to hear views about how children under guardianship were faring. There were 31 workshops involving 429 participants.

Following is a summary of the issues that were evident in more than one workshop. Other issues that were more limited were noted and will be reported in private to particular agencies.

Thank you to all who participated and contributed their knowledge and ideas.

## *Messages from discussion about children's experiences of moving while in care*

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At all workshops there were examples of moves (placement changes) that were done well, for the right reasons, and mindful of people's feelings.

The lack of choice in placements though meant sadness and frustration were the predominant emotions. The absence of choice and the sense of urgency in making decisions about placements impeded good practice and preparation and resulted in strained relationships. This impression was reinforced by reports from some alternative care agencies of not being able to meet requests for foster care placements.<sup>1</sup>

Most obvious in country regions was the difficulty in conducting professional business such as family contact, reunification, contact with social workers, and continuity in education when children were placed far away. There were many examples of this: one child from Ceduna placed in Murray Bridge; one family of six children in five different placements in a 100km radius; and several moved to Adelaide for emergency placement.

At several workshops, participants talked of the lack of information about Aboriginal children's clan group connections and consequent delays in planning for strong identity and belonging.

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<sup>1</sup> This was contradicted in conversation with carer representatives who reported significant available capacity among carer families.

Evident in all discussion was a belief in the importance of teamwork. It was felt that the time taken to build care teams paid enormous dividends in inclusive decision making, sharing of information and emotional support to everyone affected by a placement move.

There were funny stories of best laid plans being disrupted by children's choices. These emphasised the need for flexibility, to make moves at the child's pace and to plan for gradual transitions wherever possible. The timing of the conversations with children about what was to happen, and how they felt about what was happening had to be decided by the child's readiness and emotional state. One participant described how a move for a 13 year old boy had triggered memories of his initial separation from his family as a young child. This was the time to help him understand his circumstances and put the pieces together.

Also evident in several workshops was the importance of actively using Life Story Books. It was not just the physical collection of mementoes and information, but listening to the child's views about their own history which was important. Participants emphasised the need to build trust with a child so that the difficult conversations could happen safely.

Some talked of the slightly clinical and emotionally barren approach to placement referrals. They thought that the conversations among the adults missed the human dimension of such decisions and the significance of understanding this particular child and these particular carers.

### *Other topics*

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#### *Young people with complex needs*

Many workshop participants were concerned about finding appropriate placements for young people with disabilities and trauma-affected behaviour. One described the placement roundabout for a young man who had moved to residential care from a family-based placement, then to an emergency interim arrangement with rotating carers, then to a disability accommodation service, only to return to residential care. It was acknowledged that the efforts to expand the specialist alternative care placements for children with disabilities had eased some of the pressure, but there was a small number of young people whose needs were complex and for whom there still did not appear to be suitable arrangements. The gloomiest stories were told about young people who had been displaced from their home towns to the city for placements that were arguably worse than what they had left.

#### *Young people leaving care*

There appears to be lingering confusion about services available to young people leaving care and after care. In country areas the Families SA offices provide what support they can but this is limited by the demands of their mandatory work with under 18 year olds. In metropolitan areas there are mixed messages about eligibility for the Youth Support Services and the length of engagement. Participants believed that the support for young people on leaving care had diminished. In one workshop, participants talked of young people being excluded from alternative care transition programs because the young people's level of engagement with training or education was inadequate.

Overall, there was an ongoing concern that too many young people are effectively ‘abandoned’ when they turn 18, which is so different to the support offered to their age peers as they move to independence gradually. In some regions at least, it was reported that priority access to social housing had tapered to assessment for housing assistance only. Young people with mental health problems, but who did not meet the threshold of an illness, were struggling to get therapeutic assistance at the time when other supports were fading away and they needed it most.

### *Children and their siblings*

Supporting children to maintain relationships with their siblings, where they are separated, was a hot topic at some workshops. The significance of sibling contact is understood but the emphasis in policy and procedure is still on contact with parents. There were encouraging examples of exceptional efforts by some teams to arrange sibling events.

### *Children and young people in interim accommodation*

There was widespread concern about children placed in interim accommodation with ‘agency’ carers. For a small number of children these arrangements were preferred over larger congregate care settings, but for most the tenuous relationships with commercial carers was felt to be detrimental. Participants noted that the quality of care and skill of carers varied hugely and one workshop concluded that the most traumatised children were being cared for by the least trained adults. One participant described sending back a young inexperienced agency carer who had no background in working with adolescents but who had been sent 400kms to provide overnight care for a 14 year old boy. Some said that the monitoring of the quality of care for children and young people in interim accommodation was less rigorous than that applied to other care agencies and settings.

### *Care teams*

It was commonly stated that part of the solution to many of the problems facing young people in care was respectful communication among the multiple adults involved and the building of strong care teams. It was felt that the definition of the shared roles and responsibilities between Families SA and the alternative care agencies was not always clear which led to tension and disagreement. Carers, too, talked of variable support provided by their support workers and confusion about what the support workers’ role was, particularly in planning and interaction with Families SA. In some places participants reported decreased use of care plans, which they attributed to planning being seen as an administrative exercise undertaken in front of a screen.

There were heartening examples of good teamwork such as joint visits to carer families by the child’s case worker and the carer support worker, carer families assisting with reunification efforts as part of the team, carers helping each other out with emergency or respite swaps and carer representatives meeting regularly with Families SA management. There were good suggestions for additional advice and training, including the provision of more information about the court process, Aboriginal history and culture, and additional support at times when children were evidently disturbed by past abuse or current uncertainty. Carer training was also thought to be a good opportunity to reinforce the significance of adults working in unison for children and that the procedures were adjuncts to working on the human relationships.

There was frustration with the lengthy assessment and training time ahead of carer registration, with six month training being common and months waiting on background checks.

### Case work

It appeared from the discussion that a higher proportion of children are now not allocated a case worker. This is borne out by the GCYP 2013-14 *Audit of Annual Reviews* which recorded 10 per cent of children on long term orders were not allocated a case worker, compared with 3 to 7 seven per cent in previous years. Apart from the obvious impact on children, this has also resulted in longer delays in sharing information with other agencies and carers, and less time for clinical supervision and reflective practice.

Also evident was the difficulty in getting and sharing detailed information about Aboriginal children’s cultural and family background so that cultural care planning could be done well.

It was understood that some of the problems had been exacerbated or caused by the movements of case workers among the metropolitan offices in the planned relocation to establish specialist offices. More positive, though, were noticeable improvements in seeking the views of children when decisions were being made. Access to CAMHS services in most parts of the Eyre Peninsula has improved noticeably in the past few years.

### Feedback

In addition to inviting discussion of people’s interactions with the Office of the Guardian, participants completed feedback surveys. The results are summarised below in chart form.

