

Guardian for Children and Young People 2009-10 Audit of Annual Reviews Summary Report

September 2010

It is required by law in South Australia that there will be a review at least once in each year of the circumstances of each child under the guardianship of the Minister until the child attains 18 years of age.

The Office of the Guardian attends and audits annual reviews to:

- provide further external accountability on review panels
- provide some external scrutiny of case management practice and interagency collaboration
- advocate for quality outcomes for children and young people

We aim to attend ten per cent of reviews. In 2009-10 we attended 201 reviews in total, conducted in 19 Families SA offices. This represents 10.8 per cent of the reviews that should have been conducted in the year.

A full report of the audit is provided to the Minister for Families and Communities, following opportunity for comment from Families SA. This is a summary only of the report.

The focus of the audit is on knowledge of the child, the quality of care and the engagement with the child or young person. The audit does not examine case files.

Four offices facilitated children and young people to attend the review meeting.

Eighty-three per cent of children and young people whose cases were reviewed were in stable, long-term placements.

Ninety-two per cent of children and young people whose cases were reviewed were receiving services to meet their needs.

Fifteen children and young people, including three adolescents approaching independence, did not have any significant connections beyond Families SA.

For the most part, good efforts, and in some cases exceptional efforts were made to ensure family contact was maintained.

Seventy-three per cent of the Aboriginal children whose cases were reviewed were placed with their extended family or with other Aboriginal carers. In most cases there was evidence that the children had been provided with information about their cultural heritage and identity.

Thirty per cent of the children and young people had a Life Story Book.

The direct participation of children and young people is lower than in the previous two years. However, in 65 per cent of cases reviewed the social worker spoke in detail about the child or young person's involvement in case decisions and demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the child's views.

There was evidence of strong interagency collaboration in 119 cases (59 per cent).

For a discussion of what constitutes high quality reviews, the limitations of the audit we conduct and the constitution of review panels see page 2.

The full summary of findings starts on page 3.

High quality annual reviews

A good annual review is one where the focus is on the quality of the child or young person's care arrangements. Consideration should be given to stability, sense of belonging, connectedness to carer family and birth family, cultural identity, physical safety, emotional security, development opportunities, academic achievement and the child's wishes now and for the future. It is not an administrative process. It is a creative, personal process which, properly undertaken, requires the active participation of the child, their carers, relevant agencies, and where appropriate, the birth family.

Our audit of annual reviews has focused on:

- stability of placement
- individual needs of the child
- connection to significant others
- identified practice issues
- voice of the child in case planning and decision making
- identified systems issues
- interagency collaboration
- education
- cultural connections and
- preparation and provision of information such as a Life Story Book, Charter of Rights and being in care materials

Limitations of the audit

The limitations of our audit process are that we have no control over the cases reviewed and only attend those that the Families SA office has decided are due for review.

Our audit does not include examination of the case file nor do we pursue information beyond what is presented to the panel. The focus of the audit is on knowledge of the child, the quality of care and the engagement with the child or young person.

Constitution of panels

Guidelines for annual reviews encourage the participation of children, young people and significant others. Most offices still conduct them with only Families SA workers present. One office facilitated the participation of an external service provider.

With the exception of one, all offices included a cultural representative on the panel for reviews of the circumstances of Aboriginal children.

The inclusion of significant people in a child's life is an excellent way of building and developing a care team around that child. It is also the only way of ensuring that decisions are made with all of the information available. The following offices facilitated the active participation of children, their carers and/or birth family members in some of the reviews: Coober Pedy, Port Augusta, Ceduna, Marion, Murray Bridge, Onkaparinga, Port Pirie, Whyalla, Limestone Coast, Refugee Services.

Predominantly, participation was enabled by the use of the annual review survey tools¹. Four offices, Limestone Coast, Murray Bridge, Refugee Services and Whyalla, facilitated children and young people to attend their annual reviews.

¹ Guardianship Annual Review, Appendices B (Child or Young Person Survey), D (Caregiver's Survey) and F (Family Survey), available on the Families SA Intranet>Guardianship and Alternative Care>Forms and templates

Findings

Our audit in 2009-10 found that:

- Eighty-three per cent of children and young people whose cases were reviewed were in stable, long-term placements.
- Eight per cent had experienced a high number of placement changes, that is more than ten, during their time in care. Children aged five to 12 years, who had experienced significant trauma and exhibited particularly challenging behaviours encountered the most placement instability. This was not gender-specific and there was no evidence that it related to their length of time in care.
- Eleven children (5 per cent) were placed in motel-type accommodation at the time of their annual reviews.
- Ninety-two per cent of children and young people whose cases were reviewed were receiving services to meet their needs.
- There was evidence of Families SA referring seven children for health or other support services but the service agency had placed them on a waiting list. At the annual review the panel recommended another five children be referred for services including four children with disabilities who were not receiving services from Disability SA and one requiring an assessment for autism. In each case the panel recommended Disability SA participate in case planning and future annual reviews.
- Ninety-two per cent of children and young people whose cases were reviewed had at least one significant adult in their lives.
- Fifteen children and young people, including three adolescents approaching independence, did not have any significant connections beyond Families SA.
- Twenty-one of the 54 eligible young people did not have transition plans.
- For the most part, good efforts, and in some cases exceptional efforts were made to ensure family contact was maintained. However, for 22 children and young people (11 per cent) there were significant difficulties in maintaining family contact.
- Connections between siblings in separate placements remain an issue. This issue has been reported for three consecutive years.
- All offices were willing to openly discuss any identified practice issues in the cases reviewed. There were examples of excellent case work practice, including regular independent face-to-face contact between the child and the social worker, according to the child's wishes, the engagement of Disability SA in case planning and a commitment to maintain support beyond a young person's 18th birthday due to significant needs.

- Seven per cent of children and young people whose cases were reviewed did not have regular contact with the same case worker (13 children received less than the recommended monthly face-to-face contact, including seven who were unallocated to workers). This resulted in a casework service that only responded to crises and an inability to assess whether the care provided was meeting the needs of the child.
- Ninety-five per cent of cases reviewed had current case plans on the child's file.
- Sixteen per cent of children and young people whose cases were reviewed participated in their annual review, by survey or attendance. The direct participation of children and young people is lower than in the previous two years.
- In 130 cases (65 per cent) the social worker spoke in detail about the child or young person's involvement in case decisions and demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the child's views.
- Five per cent of children and young people whose cases were reviewed did not have a voice in case planning and annual reviews. For three of the 10 children whose voices were not heard it was because carers would not allow independent contact between the child and social worker and refused to engage with Families SA.
- Systemic issues that were discussed by the panels included:
 - New family-based placements for children of all ages were difficult to secure.
 - Transfer of case files between offices and interstate can take too long and is sometimes attributed to 'stone-walling'.
 - Access to services has become more difficult in some country areas due to over-demand.
 - Short-term employment contracts for social workers resulted in frequent changes of workers for children.
- There was evidence of strong interagency collaboration in 119 cases (59 per cent) to enhance service delivery and improve outcomes for the children and young people. There were a number of examples where psychologists had provided information and guidance to schools to best support the child's educational participation and achievement. In 23 cases Families SA reported that no other agency was involved in the child or young person's life and that interagency collaboration was not needed.
- Seventy-six per cent of school-age children whose cases were reviewed had current Individual Education Plans.

- There were good examples of the positive impacts of the School Retention Program for children previously considered at-risk of disengagement with school.
- Seventy-three per cent of the Aboriginal children whose cases were reviewed were placed with their extended family or with other Aboriginal carers. (Of the 201 reviews audited, 26 per cent were for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children.)
- In 47 of the 52 Aboriginal children whose cases were reviewed, there was evidence that they had been provided with information about their cultural heritage and had had the opportunity to engage in activities to promote their cultural identity. In 16 reviews the panel saw this evidence in the application of a detailed cultural identity plan on the child's file.
- All five children of refugee backgrounds were placed with their extended family or with carers from their own culture. All had connections with their cultural communities and two had attended the Tree and Team of Life camp to support their settlement and healing from trauma.
- Fifty-one per cent of children and young people who were old enough and had capacity to understand had been provided with the Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care.
- Thirty per cent of the children and young people had a Life Story Book. In 25 cases (12 per cent), a Life Story Book was considered not appropriate due to the child's lack of capacity to understand and contribute. In 18 cases (9 per cent) we were told that the carers maintained photo albums for the children and young people in their care.

Improvements

Based on comparison with the 2008-09 Audit of Annual Reviews it appears that improvements have been achieved in the following areas:

- stability of placement
- children and young people having an allocated case worker

No change or decline

Similar results to last year have been achieved in the following areas:

- engagement of services to meet the individual needs of children and young people
- children's connections to significant others
- placement of Aboriginal children with their extended family or in Aboriginal placements

Our office is particularly concerned with the results in the following areas:

- continuing decline of the participation of children and young people in annual reviews and case planning.
- number of adolescents who do not have a transitioning from care plan
- active use of Individual Education Plans
- provision of the being in care information, in particular the Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care and Life Story Books.