

Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups

Supplementary Questions on Notice by Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

Response to Questions

- 1. Does Child Protection receive disclosures or notifications relating to children in closed communities, high-control or cult-like group settings? (Yes/No)**

Yes.

- 2. Can the Department provide a general example, without referring to any specific case, of how an Area Executive Director has applied this proactive, preventative and relationship-based approach in circumstances involving a closed communities, coercive environments, or high-control group setting? (If an example cannot be provided in this specific context, could the Department instead offer an analogous example that demonstrates how this approach is applied in practice)**

It is not possible to provide a general example without referring to specific cases.

However, the role of an Area Executive Director, reporting to the Divisional Deputy Secretary, is to lead and manage service delivery and reform implementation across the area, located within one of the 4 divisions of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. The role is accountable for client outcomes at a local level for a range of integrated human services.

Key accountabilities of the role include:

- Implementing departmental and divisional priorities for direct services within the area, including child protection, housing and related community engagement and wellbeing programs
- Leading the integration of multidisciplinary service delivery within the area, with a focus on providing holistic client outcomes within evolving frameworks of reform
- Working in partnership with the Divisional Executive and other key stakeholders to achieve intended client outcomes for the department

- Addressing issues faced by the Aboriginal community through awareness of Aboriginal culture and identity and work collaboratively with Aboriginal communities to achieve positive outcomes and advance self-determination
- Leading the implementation and operation of place-based initiatives through regional partnerships
- Developing and maintaining strategic partnerships with local government, non-government organisations and the community within the area and beyond to ensure stakeholder engagement in the development of local service strategies and initiatives
- Implementing complex strategies to build buy-in and support from key internal and external clients or stakeholders.

3. Can the Department clarify:

- a. whether the eligibility criteria for the Lead Tenant program would extend to a young person aged 15–18 who is exiting, or has recently exited, a coercive high-control group setting/closed community?**
- b. how eligibility is assessed in situations where the primary harm arises not from family-based abuse or neglect, but from involvement in a coercive high-control group/closed community?**

Eligibility for the Lead Tenant program is exclusive to young people subject to a Children's Court Order that places them outside of parental care. A Children's Court protection order may be granted where the Children's Court has found the young person is in need of protection, that is, the young person has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm and their parents have not protected or are unlikely to protect them from harm.

A young person aged 15 –17 who is exiting a coercive high-control group setting/closed community would only be eligible for the Lead Tenant program if that young person was subject to an eligible child protection order granted by the Children's Court placing them outside of parental care. The basis upon which the child protection order was granted (i.e. the nature of the significant harm the young person had experienced or was likely to suffer) is not relevant to eligibility.

- c. in what circumstances a young person who is not already in out of home care may participate in the Lead Tenant program, particularly where the young person is leaving, or has recently left, a coercive high-control group/closed community?**

In exceptional circumstances, a young person may be moved into lead tenant accommodation immediately where the Children's Court grants a protection order that places them outside of parental care, rather than the usual pathway which would see a gradual and supported transition from care to the lead tenant program.

For example, where the young person entering care is aged 15-17 years and considered to be ready to immediately commence a supported transition to independent living, a

Lead Tenant placement (rather than an alternative care placement) may be determined to be in their best interests.

4. When a young person turns 18 and is no longer eligible for the Lead Tenant program, what alternative accommodation or transitional-support options are available, and how is continuity of care ensured for those who still require assistance?

Alternative accommodation options for young people leaving care, including when a young person turns 18 years and is no longer eligible for the Lead Tenant program, include:

- Public housing
- Private rental
- Community and shared housing
- Student or employment accommodation
- Supported accommodation (disability)
- Transitional housing programs, such as Youth Foyers and Housing First for Young People Leaving Care (Housing First).

Leaving Care planning begins when a young person is 15 years old, with continuity of care provided through supports that are accessible until the young person reaches 21 years.

- **Better Futures:** Young people in care are referred to the Better Futures program at 15 and 9 months and can access support until they reach the age of 21. Better Futures provides individualised supports both in-care and post-care across a range of life areas including housing, health and wellbeing, education, employment, and community and cultural connections.
- **Home Stretch:** Home Stretch supports young people until their 21st birthday by providing an accommodation allowance, case work support and flexible funding to facilitate the young person's access to education, employment and health and wellbeing supports.
- **Housing First for Young People Leaving Care:** Housing First is a new initiative that provides young people with 2 years of guaranteed housing, case work support, tenancy support, management of accommodation and flexible funding for Aboriginal young people.

5. What accommodation or support programs are available for young adults aged 18–25 who may be existing coercive high-control group/closed community environments?

Beyond the supports available to young people leaving care mentioned above, young adults aged 18-25 can access a range of community-based services and supports,

including housing and homelessness programs, and family violence programs delivered by Community Service Organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Public Housing may also be accessed via an application to the Victorian Housing Register.

The Better Futures program supports young people with the transition to independent living across housing, education, employment, health, and social connections. This includes assisting young people to access services or programs aligned with their leaving care goals for which they are eligible. Better Futures workers provide practical support for young people, such as by providing information about the nature of services and programs available and assisting young people with application processes.

6. What challenges does Child Protection encounter when assessing risk in cases involving families associated with fringe, high-control, or non-mainstream groups, particularly where parents' involvement in the group is linked to potential child safety risks, there is resistance to engagement or limited access to external environments such as education or health settings?

In addition to the response to question 8.

Child Protection uses the SAFER children framework as its guided professional judgement model of risk assessment and management.

At the centre of the SAFER children framework are the five practice activities of risk assessment, all of which require direct engagement with a child/ren and their parents:

- Seek, share, sort and store information and evidence
- Analyse information and evidence to determine the risk assessment
- Formulate a case plan
- Enact the case plan
- Review the risk assessment.

A clearly articulated risk assessment is supported by evidence, including that obtained directly from the child/ren, their parents, extended family and community and provides for appropriate intervention and case planning, working in partnership with families to increase safety for children. Barriers to engaging within closed communities, such as mistrust, isolation or limited physical access will impede Child Protection's ability to undertake risk assessment.

7. Without identifying any individual cases, what are the most common pathways through which concerns about children in fringe or high-control group contexts are brought to Child Protection’s attention (e.g., police interactions, disclosures outside the home, or identification within education/health settings)?

It is not possible to answer this question without identifying individual cases.

Child protection receives reports about children when there are concerns the child is in need of protection. A child in need of protection is a child who has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm as a result of abuse or neglect, and their parent has not protected or is unlikely to protect the child from harm of that type.

To make a report to child protection a person needs to have formed a reasonable belief that a child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm as a result of abuse or neglect, and that their parent has not protected or is unlikely to protect the child from harm of that type.

Information provided to child protection when a report is made needs to be sufficiently detailed for child protection to identify the child at risk of harm.

8. Can the Department outline any barriers or limitations to intervening in these situations. For example, challenges related to court processes, compliance with orders, executing search warrants, or resistance from the broader group communities

Broadly, barriers to intervening in closed communities may include:

- Mistrust toward government
- Internal (to the closed community) norms including elder type leadership practices
- Language and communication
- Limited access and physical isolation
- Fear.

Barriers relate primarily to the capacity to gather evidence to support risk assessment and subsequent Court applications and there are no easily identifiable challenges in the Court processes that are specific to these types of matters.