

This government is committed to ensuring that every child in Western Australia has the best possible start in life.

Above all, children must be protected from harm. I am committed to making real changes to improve the lives of all children in care, as well as improving conditions, support and training for carers and workers who provide support for children in care.

The previous Minister for Community Development commissioned an independent expert in child protection, Ms Gwenn Murray, to examine the Department for Community Development's responses when children are harmed in care. Ms Murray's report, presented to the government in December 2005, showed some changes were needed to protect these vulnerable children.

The report also provided further evidence that an ever-increasing number of children were entering care with very high needs because of complex family histories, including domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health problems. Children are coming into care at a younger age and with more serious problems, thus placing additional pressure on carers, workers and the system in general.

We are responding. The government has increased funding for the Department for Community Development in each of the past three budgets. Indeed, the 2006-07 state budget provided an additional \$140 million over four years - the single greatest allocation of additional funding in the department's history. This includes \$37 million over four years for up to 132 new staff by 2010. This additional funding will go a long way in addressing the concerns raised in Ms Murray's report. The additional funding will improve outcomes for children in care by reducing case loads and staff turnover.

An implementation committee is ensuring Ms Murray's findings are acted upon quickly. The committee comprises non-government agencies that care for children - the CREATE Foundation and the Foster Care Association - and the Department for Community Development.

The committee has now produced an action plan that will be evaluated on an ongoing basis to ensure its strategies deliver improved outcomes for children in care. I acknowledge the contribution made by the committee to vulnerable children in care, and thank Ms Murray for her continued support and advice.