



**Commissioner
for Children**

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IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Western Cape Commissioner for Children releases findings of a comprehensive study into the Alternative Care system in the Western Cape.

The Western Cape Commissioner for Children (WCCC) has released the findings of a comprehensive study into the Alternative Care system in the Western Cape. To better understand the current working of the child protection system in the province, the WCCC conducted a comprehensive situational analysis of the province's child protection system. These findings provide insights into the nature of parental care in the province, kinship care, preventative measures and early intervention strategies, as well as the involvement of children in the Alternative Care system.

A legal review explored the legal framework governing children's rights concerning family and alternative care. Whereas the rapid evidence review explored alternative care modalities within the Western Cape and the broader South African context, as well as to understand the factors within the parental care system that may necessitate a child's entry into alternative care.

During her first term of office, WCCC selected the child protection system as one of her strategic priority areas. In support of this strategy, the WCCC has invested its resources into comprehensively scoping the system and making sense of its bottlenecks – this includes a systematic study of the system itself, as well as several consultations with Designated Child Protection Organisations (DCPOs).

Through consultations with DCPOs, the WCCC built an understanding of challenges affecting the sector. The challenges identified by the organisations include the high turnover rate of Social Service Professionals (SSP) which has given rise to challenges with filling vacant posts. Reportedly causing delays in effective service delivery, casework backlogs, and clients having to constantly adapt to new SSPs. The organisations flagged the low remuneration levels, the lure of higher salaries in government, high caseloads, vicarious trauma, and stressors due to the nature of childcare and protection work as the main reasons for the majority of resignations by SSPs.

Following the initial consultations, the WCCC was able to broker a stronger relationship between DCPOs and the Western Cape Department of Social Development. This resulted in top-up funding given to DCPOs in 2023/4 to temporarily relieve some pressures while more sustainable solutions were being investigated.

Findings and recommendations

The Character of Parental Care in the Western Cape

The findings of our investigation show that the landscape of parental care in the Western Cape reflects the dynamic and diverse nature of family structures. The conventional concept of the 'family' has evolved significantly, encompassing a wide array of arrangements, including extended family households, single-parent families, same-sex couples, and child-headed households, which are prevalent.

The caregiver profile in the Western Cape is unique, with a notably higher proportion of children residing with both their biological parents (i.e. 55%) compared to other provinces in South Africa, and where over a quarter of all children (25,6%) reside in 'single-parent' households with only their mothers (South African General Household Survey, 2020). In addition, the percentage of children living with neither parent is also lower at 14% compared to national statistics. This underscores the importance of formulating policies and interventions that are specifically tailored to address the distinctive family structures prevalent in the region.

Kinship Care

The WCCC investigation findings indicate kinship care plays a significant role in South Africa's child protection framework, although it has traditionally been practised within extended family networks, becoming a recognised alternative to parental care mainly in cases of parental death.

Kinship care is seen as a valuable alternative that fosters children's emotional bonds, sense of belonging, safety, and security. Furthermore, a significant percentage of South African children live with kin, particularly grandparents, emphasising the importance of kinship care as an alternative to parental care.

In the more developed world, *formal* kinship care (placement through an administrative body) has been regulated and integrated into child welfare policies for over two decades. Whereas in South Africa, it is still emerging within the child protection framework. To this extent, *informal* kinship care is predominant, driven by private arrangements initiated by family members without administrative or judicial involvement.

The WCCC's investigation found kinship care to be the least regulated as well as protected and supported form of alternative care, despite its prevalence.

Prevention and Early Intervention

Strengthening prevention and early intervention services has the potential to gradually reduce the demand for statutory responsive interventions in child protection. Therefore, targeted services should be provided to vulnerable children and their families who are exposed to additional risks that may expose children to an increased possibility of maltreatment and violence.

Even though the Western Cape has an integrated strategy to address primary risk factors, service reach and funding remain key challenges. The budget allocated for childcare and protection is inadequate and "is significantly lower than even the most conservative costing estimates" (Department of Social Development, 2019). At a national level, it is estimated that in 2016, PEI services amounted to less than 1% of the consolidated DSD budget (Department of Social Development, 2019). Over the period of the 2014 financial year to the 2023 financial year, provincial departments across South Africa allocated between 5% and 11% of the children and family's budget to community-based care services, but differences among provinces are vast (UNICEF, 2021).

This was corroborated in the WCCC's investigation, where austerity was repeated numerous times as a challenge and gap in PEI service delivery. All NGOs interviewed concurred that there is shrinking funding for NGOs providing PEI services and some NGOs had to close their programmes in certain areas as a result. Given the current national context of fiscal consolidation, the WCCC is acutely aware that national and provincial budgets will continue to shrink over the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF). This will add even more pressure to the already shrinking PEI budget.

The DSD renders services through an extensive network made up of six regional offices, 45 local offices, and 115 NPO partners who render child protection services. Given the current nature of austerity measures, it will not be realistic to protect the funds of all PEI services funded by the Department. Thus, the WCCC recommends the Department identifies core PEI services or partners that it will continue to financially support over the next Medium-Term Expenditure Framework and clarify the budget allocation for PEI services for the current budget cycle.

Child Participation in the Alternative Care System

The alternative care system is essential for providing protective services for children in need of care. The bulk of these services are provided by Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) along the whole continuum of care and they take the lead in providing the skills, training and supervision required for good quality of care. In this process, it is important to listen to the child and ensure that the child's needs are addressed in line with their *identified*

needs. However, vulnerable children are not always given the opportunity to authentically participate in decisions that affect their alternative care placements.

In the WCCC's investigation, this was especially true for the foster care system. Here, a key gap in service delivery was the inadequate involvement of children in the feedback and decision-making process regarding their care experiences. This manifested in multiple forms, such as a lack of consultation regarding a child's foster care placement or their experiences within current foster care placements. Children who are placed away from home in foster care need specific measures in place to ensure that their voices are heard and taken seriously. This is because they are particularly vulnerable when their views are not listened to or taken seriously. These systems are required to ensure that all the actions taken are in the best interests of the children. It is not possible to represent the best interests of children without taking account of their experiences, concerns and preferences.

There are good examples of child participation practices in the alternative care system, particularly in Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCCs); known as CYCC forums, which is a requirement of the Children's Act. During the WCCC's visits to CYCCs in 2021 and 2022, the WCCC observed the functioning of CYCC forums, which were helpful for the WCCC to gain insights into children's experiences in CYCCs. While helpful, there is room for improvement, such as consulting children before they enter residential care.

This study is the first full own-motion inquiry conducted by the WCCC on a topic that was identified as a matter of concern by many people filing complaints with the Office. It fulfils our intention to work on governance matters in a systematic and strategic manner. The study was shared with the Department of Social Development head who provided a response on the Commissioner's recommendations.

You can access both the full report and the research brief by clicking on the link:
<https://rb.gy/tlkswo>

Ends.

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About the Western Cape Commissioner for Children: The Western Cape Commissioner for Children is an independent governance institution in the Western Cape. The Commissioner is mandated to protect and promote the rights, needs and interests of children in the province by working with the departments of Education, Health, and Social Development as well as Cultural Affairs and Sport. The Commissioner for Children reports to the Provincial Parliament on activities, functions and progress on objectives.