



research bulletin



Evaluation of *Rapid Response*

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Rapid Response...was developed to assist children and young people under the Guardianship of the Minister access their full entitlements in relation to health care, housing, education, welfare, disability services and employment.

The introduction of *Rapid Response: Whole of government services for children and young people under the Guardianship of the Minister* has seen changes in policies, planning and service delivery across many government agencies.

The evaluation of the initiative focused on implementation and the impact of *Rapid Response* in key areas.

Results indicate significant achievements, notably strong support for the principles of *Rapid Response* and improved awareness across government of the special circumstances and needs of children and young people under Care and Protection Orders. This information is now used much more consistently and widely in assessment and planning. Systems have been established or improved to enable better identification of when children are under Guardianship Orders. Collaborative practices have been extended with improved practices relating to the exchange of information, cross-agency planning and joint working, although 'working together' remains a complex and challenging area. Improving access to services for children under Orders has achieved mixed results particularly in those agencies where a clinical assessment of need determines resource allocation. Findings indicate the importance of ongoing support to agencies in the implementation and conduct of *Rapid Response*, including training, resources and information.

This Bulletin summarises findings from the evaluation.

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Rapid Response: Background

Rapid Response, launched by the Minister for Families and Communities in October 2005, was developed to assist children and young people under the Guardianship of the Minister access their full entitlements in relation to health care, housing, education, welfare, disability services and employment.

“It’s certainly got Guardianship kids on the agenda and we’re all thinking about it a lot more.”

Rapid Response applies to all children and young people placed under a Care and Protection Order¹ by the Youth Court. In addition, those who have left care are able to continue to receive support up to the age of 26 years.

Under *Rapid Response*, all government agencies must work collaboratively to provide children and young people with the optimum level of care and support, including during critical transition periods such as leaving care. *Rapid Response* has five Key Strategic Areas which entitle children and young people to:

1. **Case management**
2. **Assessment** – for medical, psychological, developmental and educational needs
3. **Service response** – timely access to services
4. **Information sharing and client privacy** – information shared in the best interest of the child/young person and their privacy protected
5. **Regional Guardianship Networks** – coordinated, flexible and responsive services in regional areas.

Within the Department for Families and Communities (DFC), Families SA has primary responsibility for Key Strategic Areas 1 and 5, with other government agencies sharing a commitment to other Key Strategic Areas.

The study

The evaluation was conducted by the DFC Research Unit in 2008-09, with two discrete phases. **Phase One** was an on-line survey of staff from participating agencies to assess the level of awareness and implementation of *Rapid Response*. **Phase Two** collected qualitative data through:

- Interviews with leaders across each of the key agencies
- 11 focus groups with ‘front line’ staff in both rural and metropolitan locations
- A focus group with foster carers and
- A review of documentation.

The government agencies involved in the evaluation were:

- DFC, incorporating Disability SA, Families SA and Housing SA
- SA Health, including Country Health, the SA Dental Service and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- The Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Training (DFEEST), incorporating TAFE SA and
- The Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS), including school counsellors, classroom teachers and principals.

¹ Care and Protection Orders include a range of Orders that the South Australian Youth Court may use to ensure a child or young person receives adequate care and protection. These Orders grant either Guardianship or Custody of a child for a specified length of time.

Rapid Response is a policy framework rather than a service or intervention. Consequently, the evaluation did not seek to assess outcomes for children and young people. There would be challenging methodological issues in attempting to measure such outcomes and attribute them to *Rapid Response*. Implementation timing and processes have also varied significantly across agencies and regions, compounding the complexities. The evaluation instead offered insight into the degree to which the initiative has been implemented and its impacts in key areas.

The underpinning logic of the evaluation (and also of *Rapid Response*) is the establishment of processes by which there is (a) improved identification within different agencies of when a child or young person is under a Care and Protection Order, (b) improved information exchange and relationships between agencies, and (c) priority access to government services. These are all foundations upon which improved outcomes can be realised for vulnerable children and young people.

Findings

Phase One

The survey in Phase One found respondents generally had a high level of awareness of *Rapid Response* and resulting agency obligations. In itself, this can be seen as a positive outcome – a heightened awareness of the needs and relative priority of children and young people currently or formerly under the Guardianship of the Minister. Proxy reporting regarding the impact of *Rapid Response* suggested that some benefit had been observed for clients, although this could not be quantified. Survey respondents also indicated that *Rapid Response* has had an impact on relationships and protocols between agencies that provide services to children and young people in care.

Phase Two

Implementation and establishment

Implementing *Rapid Response* was a complex process. Agency-specific policies, guidelines and information products had to be developed and training provided for a large number of staff in different agencies, roles and locations. At the time of data collection, implementation was still incomplete. Focus group participants also identified other factors which influenced roll-out, including staff turnover; the clarity and quality of training and information provided; the role and function of agencies (eg whether they had an existing role in the provision of services to children and young people in care); the extent to which agency leadership promoted *Rapid Response* and the quality of the relationship between the agency and Families SA.

“It’s a bit of work, but it’s worth the extra effort to know who our Guardianship clients are.”

Focus group participants still identified information or knowledge gaps regarding ‘the detail’ of *Rapid Response* and situations where they didn’t know ‘the right procedure’ or what to do. These included roles and responsibilities in planning (eg Individual Education Plans); the nature of specific Orders; consent processes (eg consent to medical treatment); and reporting and data collection requirements. These issues posed ongoing challenges.

Participants therefore emphasised the need for ongoing training and information to support agencies and their changing workforce as they seek to meet their obligations under *Rapid Response*.

Assessment and planning – knowing when a child or young person is under an Order

Rapid Response has successfully heightened awareness and knowledge across government about children under Care and Protection Orders, their special circumstances and needs. Importantly, this information is now used much more consistently and widely in assessment and planning.

Participants agreed that knowing when a child or young person is under a Guardianship Order serves a number of purposes. Firstly, it is a clear indicator of need and complex personal circumstances. Secondly, there is likely to be the requirement for different practices in working with these children and young people (eg interagency collaboration, consent to treatment and decision making). Thirdly, a priority service cannot be given if agencies do not know a child or young person is in care and therefore eligible.

Prior to *Rapid Response*, the Client Information Systems in some participant agencies were already able to record when a child or young person was under a Guardianship Order. However, in other agencies, *Rapid Response* highlighted the need for mechanisms to identify when a child was in care and record this detail in client records. Consequently, some have established very basic systems (for example affixing stickers to client records or manually cross-checking printed client lists with those from Families SA). Such strategies have served a valuable function, but are still quite clumsy and not viable in the long-term. Establishing and using such systems has also created some additional work and costs for partner agencies although this was generally accepted as ‘worth it’.

Working together

Participants recognised the value of partnership work, agreeing that collaboration between agencies is fundamental to quality service delivery and good outcomes for children and young people.

Some participants made the point that *Rapid Response* did not introduce new practices for them in inter-agency working and collaboration, as they had already worked closely with Families SA in providing services to children in care. However, *Rapid Response* seems to have extended collaborative practices beyond traditional agencies and into new areas. It has also heightened expectations in relation to collaborative practice. ‘Working together’ remains a complex and challenging area, however, given the many staff involved;

staff turnover; high workloads, competing priorities and the differing perspectives and responsibilities across agencies.

Providing a service

A major focus of *Rapid Response* was improving access to services. Most respondents were ambivalent about its impact in this area.

Positive results were reported in agencies where additional resources have been provided explicitly for this purpose (eg through special funding to CAMHS), when the service is benefit-related rather than clinical (eg waiving of TAFE fees; access to SA Ambulance cover); or existing resources have been redirected (eg SA Dental Services).

For other agencies - particularly health services - a clinical or multi-dimensional assessment of need remains the basis for determining service eligibility and priority. Participants from these services agreed that knowledge of Guardianship status is important, but in itself is not sufficient. A thorough assessment, especially in acute and emergency settings, may include immediate risk (to life and safety); living situation; cultural background; co-morbidities; service engagement and age. This is clinically necessary and also ensures staff are not conflicted by what they may otherwise consider an inappropriate application of process.

Participants also identified that prioritising children and young people under Guardianship may be at the expense of other children, young people and families with high or complex needs; or clients for whom 'early intervention' could prevent later serious consequences. Children in care were also often 'competing' against other Families SA clients, including children at risk, those who have been abused and require treatment or counselling, and families in the process of reunification. If these services are not provided, it may lead to an increase of children under Guardianship Orders. Competing priorities were also very challenging for agencies with other obligations to provide priority assistance to identified groups (for example, Aboriginal people, homeless people).

Respondents therefore reported that it is not always possible to create immediate capacity for Guardianship clients within a service system where there is a high level of demand for limited resources.

Rapid Response has, however, raised expectations (particularly from foster parents or case workers) regarding service access. When these expectations cannot be met, frustration and tension may result.

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Printed June 2010

Pub Number: DFC B080

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Impact within agencies

Rapid Response has created an expectation of improved identification, inter-agency collaboration, different work practices and access to services. This has created some additional demands, with work-load impacts including:

- Administrative requirements associated with the identification and transfer of information – included physical file management, updating databases and liaison with other services
- New formalised planning activities
- More detailed management of referrals and waiting lists
- Reporting and data collection
- Financial and in-kind support (eg waiving of TAFE fees, development of new resources)
- Staff costs related to training and information activities.

Conclusion

The most significant achievement of *Rapid Response* has been raising awareness of and knowledge about children and young people under the Guardianship of the Minister, including their special needs and circumstances. This has supported the development of a shared commitment across government. The evaluation found strong support for the principles of *Rapid Response*; a high degree of awareness of *Rapid Response* and resulting obligations and a higher profile for children and young people under Guardianship and better understanding of their needs. These are significant achievements, and it would be anticipated that these outcomes will bring benefit to children and young people.

Less success has been achieved in obtaining priority access to services, with some notable exceptions. This is a difficult and complex issue to which there are no easy solutions. Without dedicated resources, children and young people under Guardianship will continue to 'compete' with other high-need groups, including other clients of Families SA, especially in relation to services where a clinical assessment of need is fundamental.

The evaluation also identified the need for continuing attention in order to maintain the effectiveness of *Rapid Response*, including training, information, resources and high-level support from agencies.