



August 4, 2005

To the participants in the Child and Youth Officer's *Asking Questions* project:

Over a five-month period, from November 2004 to March 2005, members of my team met with 59 groups and carried out 47 one-on-one interviews to ask you, who are involved with child, youth and family services in British Columbia, questions about the state of those services, about what was working and what was not. We promised you that when we had gathered all the responses we received and analyzed them, we would report out on the general themes. The attached summary is our fulfillment of that promise.

I am grateful to all of you for taking the time to participate in the *Asking Questions* project and for taking time away from the many other demands on you to meet with members of my team. My hope is that the summary reflects enough of what you expressed that you will feel heard.

Learning from the observations of others

As the Child and Youth Officer, I am mandated to independently observe the state of services provided or funded by government for children and youth in British Columbia. The scope and quantity of those services are too vast for my team and me to observe directly ourselves. Of necessity, we pursue strategies to gather information and insights about services from other sources. We look at the reports and data available within the system, such as audits and summaries of data prepared for managers responsible for policy development and implementation. We gain insights by participating in joint projects with those with direct responsibility for services. We also observe by inquiring of others and listening to their observations, which is what the *Asking Questions* project was designed to do.

The summary of themes set out in the attached summary is not a statement of my own observations, although I have learned from what was heard. As Child and Youth Officer, to fulfill my responsibility as an independent observer, I need to take information from many different sources, to reflect on it and to articulate more personally my own analysis, observations and advice.

This document, therefore, is not a report from me as the Child and Youth Officer. I will be filing my annual report so that it can be laid before the Legislature in the fall session. Some of what I have learned from the *Asking Questions* project will be reflected in that report. It has already informed me in the writing of a special report on *Healthy Early Childhood Development in British Columbia: From Words to Action*, which I will be releasing in September. In addition, the repeatedly expressed concern about services designed to serve high-risk youth was the impetus for me to write a special report on youth services. That report will also reflect what we hear over the next five months from youth across British Columbia.

Who participated

Meetings and interviews were held by members of my team across all the regions in British Columbia, in numerous communities small and large, from Nelson to Cranbrook, Prince George to Vancouver, and Prince Rupert to Victoria. (A geographical breakdown of the individual interviews and group meetings is included in the appendix.) Over 30 separate First Nations, Métis and urban Aboriginal service-providing organizations participated in the meetings.

Participants included community members, service providers and managers at the community, regional and provincial levels. The service providers included those employed by the Ministry of Children and Family Development and other ministries, and by non-governmental service agencies funded by the government. These service providers deliver a wide spectrum of services for children, youth and families, including early childhood development and child care, family support, special needs identification and intervention, community living support, policing, child protection, guardianship, foster care, mental health, addictions, youth justice and employment assistance.

Why service providers?

For this project, we chose to talk primarily to service providers because service providers are in a position to see first-hand what is working and what is not. (We could have chosen instead to inquire of service recipients, and undoubtedly we would have learned from them as well. Indeed, we are currently engaged in other projects, in particular service areas, to get the perspectives of those who are on the receiving end of the services.)

The perspective of service providers is sometimes challenged as being too “subjective” or tainted by self-interest. It is true that service providers, being integrally involved in the services they observe, do not observe with the outsider’s eye, an eye that is sometimes called “objective.” That does not mean, however, that their observations are not valid or insightful. There was no doubt among my team members, who asked the questions and listened to the answers, that the participants were genuinely trying to set aside self-interest and convey what they saw. Their assessments also came from the heart, from an obvious desire to make things better for children and youth in British Columbia.

The process

My team members asked questions, listened to the answers and took notes. When requested, team members gave a summary of what was said back to the groups or individuals interviewed. The notes have been compiled and analyzed. The document that is attached to this letter will not reflect everything that was said. Not surprisingly, variations existed among and within regions. Some of what was heard was pertinent only to a particular community or emerged more as a regional rather than a provincial theme. Associate Child and Youth Officers with regional responsibility have met, or have plans to meet, with regional managers to provide feedback relevant to their regions.

What is set out in the attached summary are the key themes that were repeated across the province. A qualified researcher read all the notes and extracted those themes. Those who listened

to the answers, and the researcher who independently extracted the themes, have confirmed that the summary is a true reflection of what was heard and noted.

Negative tone and context

Although many of the participants spoke with pride about their work and with confidence in their ability to make a difference for children, youth and families, the messages heard by my team members were, for the most part, negative. The tone of the meetings was often, but not always, depressed. Frustration, anger and a sense of betrayal were expressed by a number of participants. This is perhaps not surprising. The *Asking Questions* project was conducted at the end of three years in which the system experienced substantial budget reductions and reallocations of funding that apparently, at least in some regions, are not over yet. Budget reduction and service redesign plans resulted in significant lay-offs and retirement of experienced ministry staff, and in the re-tendering of service contracts.

At the same time as seeking to meet lower budget quotas, the Ministry of Children and Family Development embarked on a major restructuring of governance and a plan for the transformation of service delivery. The plan to devolve governance authority to the regions and involve communities in planning and service delivery, which were reported by some to have initially stimulated considerable enthusiasm and hope for change, were put off for long enough that the enthusiasm was dampened and the hope replaced by cynicism. A similar cynicism has led many to question the intention to actually transform the service delivery system and to see it rather as a front for a downloading of responsibility and an excuse for budget-cutting activities. Needless to say, all of these factors affected the morale of those working in this environment.

Yet despite the rather negative overall impression, many positives were reported, albeit often framed as existing despite the cuts and the direction of government and provincial managers.

Moving towards positive change

Recognizing what is not working is a necessary part of understanding reality. At the same time, change that improves our present condition can only come about through the actions of people, and people are best motivated when they can imagine a better future to which they can contribute.

We live in a culture that tends to focus on the glass being half empty rather than half full. Dwelling on the negative can be an obstacle to moving forward. It encourages cynicism rather than hope. The Ministry of Children and Family Development and its predecessors have been, for as long as I can recall, the object of negative comment in the media and elsewhere. I worry that by reinforcing the hammering that has left that ministry, and the many dedicated people who work within it at all levels, often beleaguered and depressed, I may be working against the change that it is my responsibility to support.

Yet what my team heard from those who participated in the *Asking Questions* project must be conveyed to and acknowledged by those who are responsible for services for children, youth and families and for leading the systemic change to the child welfare system that the government has set as a goal for itself. The themes reported in the attached summary were repeated by ministry staff, as well as by service providers working for agencies on contract with the Ministry of Children and Family Development. These are the people who constitute the strength that must be built upon if the system is to change for the better.

Those in positions of responsibility may say that they have heard it all before. In my experience as a mediator, if messages are repeated it is because the people who are repeating them do not feel heard. It is only when people perceive that they are heard, and when the validity of what they have experienced is acknowledged, that they can be expected to engage enthusiastically in following in a new direction. It is then that the glass can be seen to have something in it and a better future can be imagined.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Morley', written in a cursive style.

Jane Morley, Q.C.
Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia

attachment

What We Heard

Weaknesses noted

The following themes emerged in service providers' responses to the question of what was not working in services for children and youth.

Lack of sufficient, stable and flexible funding

Service providers described a chronic lack of funds sufficient to provide quality, consistent, timely and necessary services. A number of examples of the result of this shortage were provided; they include:

- high caseloads, which in turn affect workers' ability to engage in quality interactions with children, youth and families, such as encouraging meaningful participation of children, youth and families in making decisions that affect them, and encouraging relationship development between at-risk youth and the key adults in their lives
- a general retrenchment among service providers to "dealing only with the tough cases" and not being proactive in ways that would save money in the long term
- a tendency to use custodial care (because of high caseloads and other pressures), rather than taking the time to support and engage with children, youth and families, thereby not getting to the underlying needs and issues in their lives
- a sense of pressure to get children out of care, which may not be in their best interest
- lack of adequate compensation for foster families, which in turn leads to a shortage of foster homes in some locations, especially for children and youth with special needs, and lack of motivation to seek assistance and training
- an overall shortage of appropriate youth housing
- lack of transportation funding, resulting in isolation, lack of access to services, and barriers to family visits to children in care
- lack of affordable and accessible quality child care
- barriers to progress in meaningful community engagement and collaboration, which are seen as a luxury when staff are operating "in survival mode."

Staff layoffs and loss of positions resulting from budget cuts have affected system morale. Frontline workers repeatedly said that headquarters seems to have little understanding of the ramifications of the cuts. The lack of adequate human resources results in high stress for those who are left, which in turn leads to increased illness and sick leaves; with no replacements available, more stress is created.

In addition, instability of funding was frequently mentioned as an issue. Funding tends to be one-time and short-term and is not continued, even when the ministry has agreed on the importance of a particular service. Unstable funding is perceived as working against the establishment of long-term plans and the development of new services. Ultimately, when services that could help avoid larger problems later on are not put in place, further pressure is placed on the system.

It was also reported that funding is unduly inflexible, often with rigid, unresponsive criteria; in some cases, funding is for a specific set of services, provided as an “all-or-nothing” package in which only some of the services are relevant to a particular child, youth or family,

Many service providers expressed a belief that the government’s agenda is simply to reduce spending—rather than ensuring that the needs and interests of children are met. One service provider summed up the frustration with funding shortages, instability and inflexibility by saying, “Doing the best you can isn’t the same as looking after the interests of children.”

Root causes must be addressed

Service providers consistently said that it is essential that more attention be paid to the broader social issues of poverty and unemployment. In situations where family members are unemployed and there is constant financial stress, any other problems within the family will be intensified. Service providers believe that it is not enough to simply juggle services in an effort to meet the needs, when the root causes of the needs are not being addressed.

Ministry backing away from community involvement

Many service providers expressed disappointment in and frustration with the ministry’s change in direction on community involvement and regional governance. They pointed out that the concept of a strategic shift to community ownership and engagement had received strong community support when it was promoted by the ministry and the non-Aboriginal planning committees at the regional level. Many service providers worked toward achieving this shift. There was a lot of momentum, but it was halted by the budget cuts and the announced delay in the move to regional governance. In many cases, community involvement seemed to have been abandoned in the planning process.

Service providers reported that they had invested a lot in the move to community involvement, and are very frustrated with the stoppage. They also reported that the disbanding of the regional planning committees has resulted in cynicism and a significant loss of goodwill.

Disconnect between headquarters and the field

Many service providers, both within and outside the Ministry of Children and Family Development, shared a sense of disconnection with headquarters, and expressed a belief that headquarters really doesn’t know what’s going on. Service providers from small centres often expressed the belief that people in the ministry only understand large centres. They often reported having good relationships with ministry workers on the ground, but that relationships with the ministry beyond the community are problematic. They reported a strong sense of mistrust, which is only exacerbated when the ministry makes more changes in the organization or service delivery.

Many service providers from contracted agencies stated that they did not know about or fully understand programs, policies, standards and strategic directions that come from the ministry. They felt that they were providing more leadership in the field than the ministry is, and

sometimes in spite of the ministry. They reported that they were more able to provide leadership if they had multiple funding sources and were not dependent solely on funding from the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Many service providers feel they do not have a voice within the ministry.

Gaps in youth services and lack of responsiveness to needs

Some service providers described successes in meeting the unique and changing needs of youth. However, many others reported a number of gaps in youth services, which they see as causing serious problems that significantly affect outcomes.

Many youth are “falling through the cracks” because they don’t meet the criteria for service. A common example is youth with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, who are typically just above the IQ level that is required for community living services after reaching the age of majority, but have profound functional challenges; no other appropriate services for them are provided by any other ministries, and without services they end up in serious difficulty. Another example is youth who don’t meet the criteria for mental health services when they clearly need the services.

Many service providers also reported that specific services for youth are chronically lacking:

- There are long waitlists for youth mental health services. High-risk youth do not access office-based services, and even if they do, these services are often inadequate. Many people turn to the hospital system for services, only to encounter substantial problems when they do. Lack of mental health services, and waitlists that render existing services meaningless in crisis situations, are perceived as placing considerable stress on the system, and creating much larger issues and reduced outcomes later. While there was a cautious optimism about the additional resources being provided regionally for child and youth mental health, there was also a concern that these might have the effect of increasing expectations beyond what could be met even with the additional resources.
- There is a serious lack of addiction services, even though substance abuse and addiction issues are extremely common among youth and their families. Service providers reported having access to only a very small handful of beds, and very long waitlists for any addiction services beyond detox—and “there’s only a small window of opportunity; if they have to wait, we lose them.” Distances to services create further barriers.
- Although some service providers noted success in the area of transition services for youth, others reported a lack of these services, resulting in a lack of adequate preparation for independence. Purely custodial services do not provide for this transition. Many expressed the view that youth are simply not ready for independence, regardless of what age is specified for that independence, and that while youth agreements may serve to reduce the numbers of children in care, they are not meeting the real needs of youth and are actually setting them up to fail by assuming more capacity for independence than exists. Youth agreement programs are reported to be inconsistently delivered across the province and suffering from lack of funding and related support services.
- In many locations, there appears to be a chronic shortage of experienced foster homes capable of meeting youth needs. Youth often have to be moved to another community, breaking continuity of relationships with social workers and others, and creating a sense of “always starting over.” In addition, the adoption process for youth is often too slow, with the result that “youth are left sitting in a holding tank.”

- For youth with youth agreements and youth in care in independent living arrangements, there is a serious lack of appropriate housing. Youth often have to move to find housing, once again changing hands in the system. Lack of continuity and adequacy of service is also reported to be contributing to homelessness among youth.

Several service providers noted the irony of the fragmented system of services for youth actually making life more difficult for youth—“setting up blocks over which they will stumble”—when they already have a full load of problems to cope with, even under the best of circumstances.

A number of service providers expressed concern about a lack of focus on children aged 7 to 11, who fall between early childhood development services (for ages 0–6) and youth services (for children 12 and up). They believe children in this age group are being overlooked because they are no longer young children falling within early childhood development–funded initiatives, and are not yet viewed as high-risk youth.

Obstacles to Aboriginal autonomy and culturally relevant services

Aboriginal service providers expressed a degree of continued mistrust of ministry headquarters; many felt that there is racism within the ministry and other institutions. However, there was confidence in the ability of relationship-building to counteract racism, and there were reports of good relationships at the local and regional levels. There was also some tension noted between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal service providers over service issues.

Many feel that the movement toward Aboriginal governance of and autonomy over child welfare services is stalled, and believe that Aboriginal regional authorities will never be established.

Anger and frustration were expressed about the continued adoptions of Aboriginal children by non-Aboriginal families, with calls for a moratorium or a permanent ban. (Anger was also expressed by some non-Aboriginal foster parents of Aboriginal children in care that those children cannot be adopted.)

Funding and jurisdictional issues continue to be experienced as obstacles for Aboriginal communities and agencies. These examples were noted:

- Federal funding formulas for First Nations delegated agencies do not currently fund prevention or family support services.
- The split in federal and provincial funding jurisdictions results in neither government adequately funding preventive programs such as culture and language retention.
- The situation is further complicated when guardianship for children is transferred from the province to delegated First Nations agencies that provide guardianship services only. The federal government stops providing the province with funding for these children, yet the province still retains the responsibility for any child protection assessments and investigations.
- There is no funding for services for many Aboriginal children with special needs.

In addition, Aboriginal service providers reported that the programs and services required by federal funding criteria or developed provincially are often not culturally appropriate.

Effects of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder not addressed

Many service providers reported that although Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a serious concern in British Columbia, there is a lack of services specifically for children and youth with FASD and their families.

The view was often expressed that both proper diagnosis and understanding of FASD are needed in order for service providers to recognize and deal with FASD properly, and not mistake it for other issues. However, because an FASD assessment may be unaffordable for many people and usually requires travel to major urban centres, and because many adults who might have the disorder are reluctant to have an assessment, the disorder is going undiagnosed in many cases. And, as mentioned in the section on youth services, many youth who have the disorder are falling through the gaps in services.

Lack of long-term early childhood development resourcing and planning

Early childhood development was frequently mentioned by service providers as an area that has the potential to prevent problems and indeed provide tremendous benefits as children grow into adulthood. However, several issues were highlighted.

For example, while much interesting work has been done by intersectoral coalitions, which have formed in every region of the province to decide how best to serve the young children in their communities, these groups have been operating with very short-term funding (which makes it difficult to do long-term planning) and with little or no program funding (so they can't implement the plans they have developed). Service providers report a clear need for a long-term plan supported by sufficient resources; short-term funding doesn't achieve this.

It was reported that many child care facilities have closed, or have had their spaces filled only by those who can afford to pay, because of the changes to child care programs and funding, including cuts in subsidies, changes in funding for child care facilities, and changes in the qualifications for funding for preschool (under Income Assistance). The current child care subsidy application process (through a 1-800 number) has prevented many people from accessing subsidies. And while some of the changes have been reversed, there are no longer many spaces left for children who are eligible for subsidy, because they have all been filled by children whose parents are able to pay.

Service providers expressed frustration with the fact that, in spite of the great deal of federal money that has come into the province for early childhood development, the hoped-for provincial system for early childhood development and child care hasn't materialized. Frustration was also expressed about the fact that at the same time that the federal money was given to the province, the province substantially cut the budget for child care and spent the federal money on "anything but child care." The lack of a long-term plan for early childhood development and child care and of a strong infrastructure has resulted in less progress than expected given the new funds available.

Insufficient and inconsistent research and evaluation

Service providers acknowledged the importance of evaluation and reported that many of their organizations have evaluation plans. However, many perceived that while there was talk about the importance of evaluation, actual evaluation efforts were spotty and inconsistent, because of

lack of time, and financial and/or human resources. Contracted agencies expressed the view that they were more engaged in evaluating their programs than the Ministry of Children and Family Development was.

Service providers, and especially those responsible for evaluation, expressed a need for a common information system and even a database that would allow tracking and comparisons over time. They also noted a need for standardization of evaluation, so that comparisons can be made across communities and regions.

Most significantly, service providers reported a lack of information about outcomes, especially concerning youth leaving the system, and considerable apprehension about those outcomes.

Policies with “vicious circle” consequences

Many service providers described unintended negative consequences—such as extra costs, and exacerbation of problems—of ministry policies and strategies. Here are some examples:

- If family members are able to provide care—for example, for children with special needs—they are seen as family and not needing financial assistance for providing that care; without that assistance, the family can’t provide the care, and more expensive care is needed.
- When children are removed, the family gets inadequate support, so that when the children are returned, the family situation hasn’t improved enough, and the children have to be removed again.
- Workers are only mandated to provide services if a family is assessed as needing protective services. If a family is in need of other, more preventive services, such as child care or parenting courses, but there is no protection issue (i.e., the child is not in danger of harm), the social worker does not have the mandate, the time or the resources to help. With preventive services not available, much more costly interventions are often needed later.
- Ministry policy underestimates the complexity of out-of-care placements and therefore does not provide necessary supports. These placements then end up falling apart and result in the children being removed.
- Community living services workers are not delegated, but delegated social workers often don’t have the skills to work with children and youth with significant disabilities.
- Service providers agree that community engagement is a good idea, but they are too over-extended to do it, and problems that could be resolved through community engagement continue, further over-extending service providers.
- The lack of adequate human resources results in high stress for those who are left, which in turn leads to increased illness and sick leaves; with no replacements available, even more stress is created.

Strengths noted

Service providers noted a number of things that are showing potential or are already working well, and that are linked to improved service and better morale.

Service providers in some communities reported good communication with the ministry locally, with resulting increased trust and mutual respect between themselves and ministry staff in the community. When local ministry and other service providers meet and work together as a team to resolve issues, the general climate is improved and problems are solved—as opposed to situations where communication is spotty or poor. Incidents were described in which in some communities, regular meetings helped address urgent concerns early, before they grew.

Service providers expressed the most satisfaction with situations in which they have the flexibility to be able to do what it takes to meet the needs of the children, youth and families in their care, at the right time and in the right way. This flexibility seemed to occur when the lines of communication were perceived as open and problem-solving was seen by all as a team process.

Many cases were described of contracted service providers partnering to provide for the needs of clients, whether through co-location of services and sharing of facilities or through adjusting and combining services in order to fit individual or family needs. (In some places, these partnerships were undertaken as a survival strategy in the face of funding cuts, to stretch resources as far as they could go to try to meet the needs of clients.) Situations where ministry youth services staff and contracted agency staff were co-located were felt to be beneficial for all, and especially for youth.

Many service providers described positive experiences with innovations such as family group conferences and mediation. They agreed that while these practices take time, they produce excellent results.

Some service providers have established links they viewed as relevant with academic institutions for the purposes of research and evaluation.

Finally, in all of the discussions it was clear that service providers are deeply committed to the families and communities they serve. Many stories were told of people going above and beyond the call of duty to see that services were provided for those who needed them.

Appendix

	Vancouver Coastal	Fraser	Van Isle	Interior	North	Prov.	Total
Individual Interviews	7	10	11	10	4	5	47
Group Meetings	6 (54)*	10 (92)	13 (125)	21 (121)	7 (66)	2 (6)	59 (464)

*number of meetings (approximate number of participants)