

Response by the Office of the Prime Minister Gender and Child Affairs to the Recommendations of the 5th Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity

Recommendation:

LX. The Committee reiterates the Investigation Team's recommendation that Sections 3 (1) and (2), and 17 of the Children's Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act be proclaimed as soon as possible.

Response:

Sections 3 (1) and (2), and 17 of the Children's Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act came into effect on July 1, 2023.

Recommendation:

LXI. The Committee recommends that the OPM-GCA prioritise the establishment of the Office of the Children's Commissioner and that – in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child's (CRC's) recognition of the importance of international cooperation and technical assistance in protecting the rights of the child – possible avenues for capacity building support in this regard from other jurisdictions, where such offices are in place, be actively explored.

Response:

A Draft Policy Document on the Children's Commissioner, which was prepared by GCA, was reviewed and revised. However, the Standing Committee on Child Protection considered and agreed that an Assessment of the Children's Authority should be undertaken to assess the degree to which the agency has been able to carry out its mandate as prescribed in the Act and in the context of its strategic objectives and to make recommendations to strengthening the system. The Terms of Reference for the Assessment was completed and action has commenced to procure a Consultant to undertake the work.

Recommendation:

LXII. The Committee recommends that the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT) provide an update on the full transition away from Statutory Authorities Service Commission (SASC) staff at the St. Dominic's Children's Home (SDCH), and that the CATT briefly report on the possibility of same at the St. Jude's Home for Girls (SJHG).

Response:

The Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT) mandate does not include staffing at Children's Homes. In this regard, this responsibility falls within the remit of the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs.

In 2018, the St. Dominic's Children's Home (SDCH) sought separation from the Statutory Authorities Service Commission (SASC) due to resistance from Public Officers for submission of documentation required for licensing of the Home. In March 2020, Cabinet considered this matter and agreed to the separation, subject to a Voluntary Separation of Employment (VSEP) and abolition of positions. In 2023, a further submission was made to Cabinet regarding the transfer of the staff attached to SDCH to other Children's Homes. A decision on this submission is pending.

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With respect to St. Jude's Home for Girls (SJHG), no action is currently being taken as it relates to the transition away from the Statutory Authorities Service Commission (SASC).

Recommendation:

LXIII. The Committee recommends, in light of the budgetary supplementation received, that the CATT provide all relevant assistance to the individual Children's Homes in their efforts to recruit more staff to better fulfil their important mission.

Response:

The mandate of the CATT does not include recruitment of staff at Children's Homes. The Authority, through the delivery of numerous training programmes, seeks to enhance the capacity of the staff to undertake their roles and responsibilities at Children's Homes, Community Residences, Foster Care, and Nurseries.

Recommendation:

LXIV. The Committee recommends that the CATT provide confirmation of the rollout of the training programme for Children's Homes staff by the University of the West Indies (UWI), including the contents of the programme, the number and types of staff who were among the first cohort to be trained and the planned sessions of this training going forward.

Response:

The training for Children's Homes' staff by the University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine Campus, commenced on May 9, 2023 and is scheduled to end in September 2023. A total of one hundred (100) persons, which consists of caregivers and supervisors, are receiving in-person and online training. The curriculum for this training aligns with international best practices and other recommendations that have emerged from the report of the Cabinet-appointed Committee to review allegations of child abuse in residential care facilities. Collectively, the recommendations and insights from existing reports and studies have informed the proposal of a comprehensive training programme that treats with:

- legislative or regulatory components of childcare and protection;
- working with vulnerable populations;
- safeguarding in residential care;
- child development, identity and transitioning to adult independent care;
- conflict management and resolution;
- mood, neurodevelopmental and impulse control disorders;
- abuse, trauma and trauma-informed care;
- principles and practices of child protection and safeguarding;
- management functions and emerging leaders;
- case management and conflict management;
- first aid and basic life support; and
- professional ethics for residential workers.

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Recommendation:

LXV. The Committee recommends that the Standing Committee on Child Protection (SCCP) prioritise its consideration of the Kinship Foster Care Policy and the Foster to Adopt Policy with a view to these policies being implemented without further delay.

Response:

The CATT developed a Foster-to-Adopt Policy which was approved on May 27, 2022. This is currently implemented within the Foster Care and Adoption Units. The Authority has also developed a Kinship Foster Care Policy which was approved in February 2023. The implementation of these Policies is currently underway.

Recommendation:

LXVI. The Committee recommends that the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (GORTT) ensure the incorporation of the recommendations of the Commonwealth Youth Forum (CYF) and the Commonwealth's Kigali Declaration into the implementation of its suite of child protection policies.

Response:

The Commonwealth Youth Forum (CYF) recommended that Commonwealth Governments do the following:

- allocate funding to end institutionalisation by transforming their care system to one that supports families, not institutions;
- gather better data about children's care status, family environment and the scale of the proliferation of institutions for children; and
- build the capacity and expertise of youth workers, social workers and health workers to be drivers of change and reform.

The Kigali Declaration on Child Care and Protection Reform of 2022 recognised: *"the importance of providing a range of quality alternative care options, including, inter alia, family and community-based care..."*. These recommendations have been incorporated into the child protection policies of the CATT.

The Kinship Foster Care System has been implemented through the allocation of \$768,000.00 to CATT. Thus far, the CATT has recruited five (5) Kinship Foster Care Case Workers, and orientation and training of these new staff were conducted between May and June 2023. The Kinship Foster Care team has begun reviewing referrals to assess their appropriateness for Kinship Foster Care.

In another move towards deinstitutionalisation and gathering data about children's care status, the CATT embarked on a project to conduct an audit of children in Community Residences. The aim of this initiative is to prioritise alternative care, with a view to determining which children can be possible candidates for adoption, reintegrated with their parents/family members or be referred to Kinship Foster Care. The project spanned January 2023 to April 2023 and was partially funded by UNICEF. During this project, thirty-five (35) community residences, consisting of approximately five hundred (500) children were audited. One hundred and twenty-one (121) children were identified as possible candidates for adoption, while

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approximately one hundred and seventy-five (175) were identified as candidates for either reintegration or Kinship Foster Care.

Currently, further investigations are being conducted to ensure that the recommended placement options are viable and in the best interest of the children and their families.

Recommendation:

LXVII. The Committee recommends that the practice of housing Children in need of Supervision (CHINS) as well as Children in Need of Care and Protection at the SJHG be discontinued.

Response:

It has been observed that the behaviour of Children in need of Supervision (CHINS) and children in need of care and protection can be similar. Both groups of children normally require secure accommodation and there is often a requirement to separate children belonging to both groups, based on their level of risk.

Due to the aforementioned reasons, the SJHG is utilised for the housing of both groups of children. Furthermore, the SJHG was relocated to another space on June 30, 2023 which provides a greater opportunity for separation of the girls.

Recommendation:

LXVIII. The Committee recommends that the Ministry of Education (MOE) work with the CATT to ensure that the quality of curriculum delivery of in-house education at all Children's Homes is the same as external schools in order to address the low academic standards observed at many Homes.

Response:

The Ministry of Education (MOE) and the CATT continue to collaborate to ensure that the quality of curriculum delivery of in-house education at all Children's Homes is the same as in external schools.

Further, it is expected that Children's Homes will be included in the future developmental build of the School Learning Management System (SLMS) which will allow school access to students awaiting transfer.

Recommendation:

LXIX. The Committee recommends that the MOE support the SJHG towards the registration of the existing unregistered school run by the SJHG.

Response:

The St. Jude's Home for Girls noted that it is willing to collaborate with the Ministry of Education (MOE) for the establishment of an in-house school on its compound to accommodate the residents. The MOE has informed that, while the school at the SJSH does not meet the normal criteria for registration as a public school or for home schooling, the Ministry will seek

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to ensure that arrangements are put in place for quality curriculum delivery with the support of the CATT.

Recommendation:

LXX. The Committee recommends that the MOE as a matter of urgency, sensitise school administrators to the discriminatory nature – both morally and under international human rights standards – of stigmatising prospective students who reside in Children’s Homes.

Response:

The Ministry of Education, through the Student Support Services, and School Supervision and Management Divisions, will conduct sensitisation sessions with principals/administrators at the education districts’ termly Principals/Administrators Conferences and Fraternity Meetings. In addition, teacher information sessions will be done in collaboration with the School Based Intervention Team (SBIT) and the District Leadership Team (DLT) to create awareness and instil a sense of advocacy for children who reside in Children’s Homes.

Recommendation:

LXXI. The Committee recommends that the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service (MYDNS) give extra priority to the development of additional Transition Homes to build on the progress made to date in the development of Hostels as recommended by the Investigation Team.

Response:

The Ministry of Youth Development and National Service (MYDNS) is in support of the recommendation of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality & Diversity that the Ministry give extra priority to the development of additional Transition Homes to build on the progress to date in the development of Hostels as recommended by the Investigation Team.

Since its establishment in 2020, the MYDNS has embarked on a concerted effort to increase its suite of Transition Homes as well as engage in refurbishment and upgrade works at its National Male Transition Home in Saint Madeline towards increasing its residential capacity to provide transitional services for young people.

These facilities will cater to single gender occupancy and target young men and women who were wards of the State and left alternative care at the age of 18. Through a two-year programme comprising accommodation and other wraparound social services, young people will be empowered to transition successfully into adulthood by equipping them with the necessary skills and tools needed to become independent, healthy and productive individuals.

Every resident is provided with a comprehensive Development/Care Plan tailored to their specific needs. Each resident is also paired with both a Mentor and a Case Manager for personalised support. Furthermore, various government agencies and private sector entities collaborate to coordinate additional services, including healthcare and employment placement. Residents also receive a monthly stipend of \$1,000.00 for personal care items. The table

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hereunder illustrates the MYDNS' efforts to date towards satisfying the need for Transition Homes:

Facility Name	Location	Management and Operations
Josephine Shaw House for Young Women	No. 131-133 Henry Street, Port of Spain	This transition home is a newly constructed single gender facility for females. A Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) between the MYDNS and the Salvation Army of Trinidad and Tobago Division for the Management and Operation of the Josephine Shaw House for Young Women is being arranged. This is to be executed by September 2023 for the commencement of operations at this facility. When operationalised this facility will accommodate a total of twenty-five (25) female residents, inclusive of accommodations for two (2) differently abled residents.
National Male Transition Home	No. 18, Archie Drive, Ste. Madeline	On the 16th of October 2020, the National Male Transition Home was officially transferred from the Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs) to the MYDNS. The capacity of the facility when transferred to the MYDNS was eleven (11) residents. Cabinet by Minute No 1818 of November 3, 2021 agreed, <i>inter alia</i>, to the refurbishment and upgrade works at the National Male Transition Home. Works are estimated to be complete by October 31, 2023 at which time the facility will be able to facilitate a maximum of twenty-eight (28) male residents.
Sevilla Transition Home for Young Women	Sevilla Compound, Couva	Cabinet by Minute No. 2136 of December 22, 2021 agreed, <i>inter alia</i>, to the utilization of two buildings on the Sevilla Compound located in Couva for the establishment of a Transition Home for young females.

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Facility Name	Location	Management and Operations
		Refurbishment and renovation works are expected to be completed on one of the buildings by November 30, 2023. Upon completion, this building will accommodate sixty-four (64) residents, inclusive of four (4) differently abled residents.
National Service Complex Beach Camp	Beach Camp Palo Seco	Cabinet by Minute No. 1666 of October 7, 2021 agreed, <i>inter alia</i> , to the establishment of a National Service Complex by the MYDNS at Beach Camp, Palo Seco. This Complex when completed in 2025 will accommodate male and female residents in two separate buildings on the compound.

Recommendation:

LXXII. The Committee recommends that the CATT ensure that there are common aftercare guidelines and procedures as a pattern for all Homes to follow in their respective circumstances.

Response:

The CATT developed a Transitioning Policy for all Homes, which was ratified by the Board of Management in 2022. The purpose of this Policy is to provide a clear framework for staff to address the practical and emotional needs of children who were received into the care of the CATT, and who are scheduled to transition out of the CATT. It also provides guidance on preparing such children for the transition to independent living at the age of 18.

From age 16 and onwards, the Authority's staff, in close collaboration as needed with the child, their family and/or their Community Residence/caregivers, engage in transition planning in accordance with the policy, with a focus on ensuring the following common strategies are in focus:

- youth have personal information;
- provision of care and nurturing prior to adulthood;
- the child has a support system upon turning 18 years old;
- the child is aware of potential inheritances after ageing out;
- empowering the youth with necessary life skills prior to ageing out;
- securing housing upon ageing out;
- there is continuity of legal matters;
- the aging-out child possesses basic necessities; and
- empowering aging-out children with knowledge of their entitlement, and how to access all necessary state and government resources and programmes.

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Recommendation:

LXXIII. The Committee recommends that the CATT consider establishing, as part of aftercare, a system to track the overall development of former Children's Homes residents as they transition into independent adults, in order to have an ongoing understanding of the challenges faced and to update the transition arrangements available to Children's Homes residents accordingly.

Response:

The CATT collaborates with the National Family Services Division (NFSD) of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to provide assistance to former Children's Homes' residents, as required. The mandate of the CATT is to target the needs of children in need of care and protection, which is up to the age of 18 years old. However, it is proposed that the CATT, on a twice-yearly basis, engage NFSD for follow-up on those cases that have been referred, with a view to determining any pertinent factors that can be considered as part of transition planning for other children prior to ageing out of care.

Recommendation:

LXXIV. The Committee recommends that the SCCP, via the OPM-GCA, submit periodic updates to Parliament on progress towards the full implementation of the Investigation Team's recommendations and detailing any possible challenges encountered in this regard.

Response:

The SCCP is committed to providing a status report on the progress of its work to the Cabinet on a biannual basis, in keeping with its reporting requirements. The Cabinet may determine whether such reports will be forwarded to the Parliament.

Recommendation:

LXXV. The Committee recommends that the OPM-GCA consider the suitability of using the *ExtendedReach* programme or a similar such software application and report its views on same to Parliament.

Response:

ExtendedReach is a web-based, case management software that helps Child and Family Social Service Agencies deliver and track efficient, effective, and consistent services. It helps clinicians and providers of direct social services go paperless by managing scheduling, reporting, approvals, billing and accounting services. Due to the remit of the Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs) (OPM(GCA)), the recommended software is not useful to the Division as it does not engage in direct practice or casework. While some of the tracking and reporting aspects of the recommended software may be relevant to the OPM (GCA), these tasks are being done under the National Children's Registry (NCR) which has been operational since May 2022.

It should be further noted that the software in question may be better suited for use by the CATT. However, since June 2022, the CATT has been using the globally recognized Primero

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Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS), further to a collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Spotlight Initiative. The CPIMS is a web-based platform that streamlines the processing of cases, including registration, assessments and referrals. This, along with the NCR will ensure secure linking between key national systems designed to:

- ensure children achieve key milestones;
- alert agencies of children at risk;
- ensure timely intervention for children; and
- prevent the duplication of services.

Recommendation:

LXXVI. The Committee recommends that the OPM-GCA encourage private sector entities to engage in or strengthen initiatives including financial contributions to the child protection system and the provision of professional development opportunities for Children's Homes residents in preparation for their transition out of the child protection system, as a matter of good corporate citizenship.

Response:

On April 4, 2023, the OPM-GCA launched the Training Wards for Self-Sufficiency programme with the aim of supporting residents transitioning. While currently in the pilot stage, this initiative seeks to build sustainability in the social safety net system for former wards of the State, through training and education, with an underlying thrust towards the graduation of beneficiaries to be independent income earners and wealth accumulators. Five (5) private and State-supported community residences are participating in the programme, with forty (40) residents matriculating.

Partnerships have been made with both civil society and private entities to deliver various training components of this programme. To date the OPM-GCA has been engaging the UWI Open Campus and Access Media Academy. It is envisioned that upon the conclusion and evaluation of the pilot, the programme will be expanded to include a robust mentorship component in collaboration with the *Heroes Foundation* as well as other entities from the private sector. The recommendation is therefore noted. The OPM (GCA) will pursue and encourage the greater involvement of the private sector through the provision of professional opportunities and financial contributions to residents in transition.

It is also pertinent to note that the CATT will also be pursuing partnerships with private sector entities as it continues its reorganisation drive.

