

CHILD ABUSE, INVESTIGATION OF ALLEGATIONS

332. Mr R.F. JOHNSON to the Minister for Community Development, Women's Interests, Seniors and Youth:

I refer the minister to ongoing claims by the Community and Public Sector Union that allegations of child abuse are not being investigated because of a lack of social workers in the Department for Community Development.

- (1) Of the 68 cases that were not investigated, as reported in the Department for Community Development's annual report, how many were not investigated because of a lack of staff?
- (2) Given this Government's supposed commitment to eradicating child abuse, why was there no funding increase for the protection of children teams in the last budget?
- (3) Given the seven per cent increase over the past financial year in child abuse allegations, will the minister now immediately make provision for the employment of at least an extra 35 social workers to investigate allegations?

Ms S.M. McHALE replied:

- (1)-(3) The former Government had a remarkable habit of adding to programs without adding the money. When we came into government, a number of very key portfolio areas, including mine, had underfunded programs and overbudgeted items. We have been assiduous in making sure that our financial and budget management is exact. It is my responsibility as minister to make sure that my departments operate within their budgets. I am pleased that in the 2002-03 budget we increased funding for children in care by \$4.7 million. The Opposition cannot say that the area of child protection is not a government priority. We stand by our record of having increased that budget by -

Several members interjected.

Ms S.M. McHALE: Members opposite either want to listen to this answer or they do not.

The SPEAKER: Order! The interchange across the Chamber is at an unacceptable level.

Ms S.M. McHALE: The budget to manage children in care was increased by \$4.7 million. The specific question that the member asked goes to the detail of the annual report, and if he had given me some notice I could have answered that. There are three categories of child protection records. From my recollection of the annual report, no priority 1 cases were not examined within the time frame.

It is incumbent on me to say that this Government is totally committed to child protection and community development and strengthening our communities. We need several approaches to manage these significant problems. What we will not do is manage our budget recklessly, which seems to be the characteristic of the Opposition when in government. The Government established the Gordon inquiry, and it is reviewing the recommendations from that report. I suggest that members opposite bide their time so that this Government can look at those recommendations and act accordingly.