



Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry
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Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children

Introduction

Community Child Care (CCC) is the peak body for community based children's services in Victoria. We strive to create a society where all children have access to high quality, community owned, not for profit services driven by respect for the rights of children and families. The Inquiry into Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children is an important opportunity to build the capacity of universal children's services to fully serve the needs of children at risk of abuse and neglect, by strengthening the connection between universal education and care services and services providing welfare to vulnerable children and families.

High quality children's education and care services play a crucial role in the early identification of children and families who are vulnerable and at risk of abuse and neglect as well as in the provision of support. A key strategic goal of CCC is to build the capacity of children's services to ensure they are accessible for vulnerable families¹.

Universal early childhood education and care is currently undergoing major reform nationally through COAG to improve quality and ensure consistency so that every family in every part of Australia can confidently participate in children's services. These reforms will lift the quality of services to children and some vulnerable children will inevitably benefit; the Inquiry is uniquely placed to leverage this historic transformation of the universal children's services system in order to ensure that all vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families reap the full benefits of access to and participation in these vital services.

High quality early childhood education and care costs money and Australia is not yet investing sufficiently in early childhood; UNICEF recently revealed that Australia is below the average of other developing countries in areas of early childhood development, youth suicide and levels of basic immunisation. The league table of 27 OECD countries

¹ Community Child Care (2010) Strategic Plan 2010-12 available online; http://www.cccinc.org.au/strategic_plan.htm

shows that Australia spends one-quarter of the amount that the leading country, Finland, spends on early childhood education².

The research evidence is clear that high quality children's services have a positive impact on improving outcomes for vulnerable children. CCC is calling on all governments to commit to invest in quality services now³. CCC believes an early childhood education and care system should be able to work in a cross disciplinary manner to enhance the education, health and well being outcomes for all children. If we can get it right for the most vulnerable children, then we will get it right for all children.

This Inquiry can ensure that this investment results in improved opportunities for children at risk of abuse and neglect by proposing specific strategies such as:

- Outreach capacity for universal children's services
- A Quality subsidy for social inclusion
- Continued investment in capital infrastructure for integrated early childhood education, care, health and family support services
- Investing in Leaders for integrated services
- Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership to develop a Community Participation Leadership program designed for services which are covered by the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework with a specific focus on how to engage and retain vulnerable families
- Investing in Outside School Hours Care Coordinators to better integrate school and care and enhance stability for families
- Establishment of a Vulnerable Children's Framework
- Maintenance of non-profit ownership of child and family services
- Maintenance and expansion of financial support such as Special Child Care Benefit
- Support for improved qualifications and training and improved staff:child ratios in early childhood education and care services
- Support for initiatives which aim to improve the skills and knowledge of people working with children and families in identifying and responding to abuse and neglect
- Establishment of an independent Children and Young Person's Commission

Below we respond to specific terms of reference for this Inquiry.

² UNICEF (November 2010) The Children Left Behind

³ Community Child Care (2010) Policy Demands State Election, available online <http://www.cccinc.org.au/content.cfm?content=62>

Terms of Reference:

To inquire into and develop recommendations to reduce incidence and negative impact of child neglect and abuse in Victoria, with specific reference to:

1. *The factors that increase the risk of abuse or neglect occurring, and effective prevention strategies*

Factors which increase risk

CCC refers the Inquiry panel to the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) policy briefs exploring issues raised by early childhood research to inform policy and practice. The brief titled *Engaging Marginalised and Vulnerable Families*⁴ notes parents most likely to be in need are the parents 'least likely to access support'. This brief analyses the barriers that prevent vulnerable families from accessing the services they need including:

- Structural barriers in the services themselves such as inaccessibility and lack of transport and child care
- Family factors such as poverty and low literacy levels
- Relationship barriers such as judgemental attitudes and cultural insensitivity of service providers

Vulnerable families often struggle to engage with universal early childhood education and care and so their children miss out on the benefits and start school with a reduced capacity to engage in formal education; this perpetuates intergenerational disadvantage and demonstrably reduces learning and social outcomes for individual children throughout their lives.

Effective prevention strategies

CCC believes universal early childhood education and care services are currently underutilised as a platform for delivery of support to vulnerable families and children. Many services need guidance and support to overcome the structural and relationship barriers in order to reach out and assist vulnerable families to overcome their own challenges and eliminate barriers to participation. An effective preventive strategy is investment in universal early childhood education and care which is tightly tied to demonstrable outcomes for children at risk of abuse and neglect.

⁴ Centre for Community Child Health (2010) *Engaging Marginalised and Vulnerable Families*, Policy Brief 18, p1, available online www.rch.org.au/ccch/policybriefs.cfm

Research shows that investment in high quality, accessible and affordable children's services can assist in lifting families out of poverty and provide the type of stimulation that has been proven to be critical in promoting optimum outcomes for children during the first six years of life.⁵ International research demonstrates that high quality early childhood education and care is especially effective in supporting the healthy development of children facing serious abuse and neglect⁶ and pre-school programs can be an effective intervention for the reduction of special educational needs, especially for the most disadvantage and vulnerable children⁷.

The provision of high-quality early childhood programs also saves the public money in the longer term through improved education outcomes, reduced rates of crime and incarceration⁸. The current COAG Early Childhood Quality reforms are a good start; these reforms will result in more highly qualified staff and better child:staff ratios which are demonstrably in the best interests of children. However these reforms alone will not ensure that children at risk will benefit.

Victoria has a good record with social inclusion and children's participation in early childhood education and care services; however the relatively small percentage of children who often miss out include those who are most at risk.

CCC believes that universal early childhood education and care services can do better in engaging and supporting children at risk of abuse and neglect. Government has a role in articulating its expectations of these services and in supporting and resourcing the outcomes it seeks. CCC proposes that the Victorian Government consider the introduction of a Quality Subsidy for Excellence in Social Inclusion which we believe will make a significant contribution towards the capacity of the Victorian Government to ensure that **all** children share the benefits of higher quality in children's services.

⁵ Risman, B.J 'The Causes and Consequences of Children's Poverty' *Quality of Life in North Carolina* Vol 23, No 1. NC State University and The Brotherhood of St Laurence (2000) 'No Child' *Child Poverty in Australia*, BSL Victoria

⁶ Shonkoff, J. P and Phillips, D. A. Eds (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* National Academy Press, Washington D.C. p 11 and Ramey, C.T. Campbell, F. (March 1984) 'A Preventive education for high-risk children: Cognitive consequences of the Carolina Abecedarian Project' *American Journal of Mental Deficiency*, Vol 88(5), pp 515-523.

⁷ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Sraaj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B. and Elliot, E. (March 2003) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from the Pre-school Period* Institute of Education, University of London, p1

⁸ National Crime Prevention (1999) *Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia*, National Crime Prevention, Attorney-General's Department: Canberra, pp.41-43 & pp 186-187

The Quality Subsidy would be offered directly to children's services which demonstrate they are providing high quality services to children in priority target groups. A 'whole of government' approach should be taken to resourcing of this subsidy - with contributions from DEECD, DHS and other relevant government departments to break down funding silos and support integrated, flexible, holistic approaches to meeting the needs of vulnerable children and families.

There are a range of mechanisms that could be used to set the level of subsidy such as a percentage of staffing costs; the precise mechanism is less important than the mechanism for Government to ensure that the public subsidy is delivering the policy outcomes it wants – CCC proposes that in order to receive the quality subsidy services would need to demonstrate they are achieving quality standards, genuine social inclusion and community engagement.

2. Strategies to enhance early identification of, and intervention targeted at, children and families at risk, including the role of adult, universal and primary services. This should include consideration of ways to strengthen the capability of those organisations involved.

CCC again refers the Inquiry panel to the Centre for Community Child Health Policy Brief on *Engaging Marginalised and Vulnerable Families*⁹. This important summary of key learnings from international research concludes that the primary factors for effective engagement are:

- the quality of relationship between the parent/carer/family and the service provider
- establishing shared decision-making
- cultural awareness and sensitivity
- non-stigmatising interventions and settings
- minimising the practical or structural barriers to accessing services
- providing crisis help prior to other intervention aims.

Further services must provide multiple opportunities for families to meet and build supportive networks with other families who have young children. Engagement is enhanced by:

⁹ Centre for Community Child Health (2010) *Engaging Marginalised and Vulnerable Families*, Policy Brief 18, available online www.rch.org.au/ccch/policybriefs.cfm

- provision of assertive outreach and support to families not yet connected with other families or services
- provision of a mix of 'soft' and 'hard' entry points to the service system
- and establishment of strong reciprocal links with other relevant services (universal and specialist)

In regard to children's services in particular, CCC supports flexible and responsive delivery of high quality early childhood education and care services, matched to local community need and demand, delivered in a way which enables civic participation to strengthen communities.

Early childhood education and care services have the capacity to assist individuals to solve problems, and serve a preventative role. They are one of the few reliable reference points, available in almost every community including the most disadvantaged, and are a place where families come together naturally in a non-stigmatising and equal way, connected across class and cultural boundaries by a shared interest in their children.

Outreach Strategies

CCC proposes that the Victorian Government invest in outreach services to ensure that children's services are accessible to vulnerable children and families who might otherwise miss out on the proven benefit of high quality early childhood programs. This investment could be for practical outreach measures such as:

- Community buses with qualified early childhood workers or welfare/community workers to transport to services children who might otherwise miss out on the opportunity to participate in early years programs in Victoria; this offers an opportunity for co-investment with business or private contributions. CCC understands this type of outreach occurs in some Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) and has been shown to be a successful strategy to ensure that children from disadvantaged contexts attend early childhood services regularly.
- Resourcing for outreach social workers skilled in working with families to reach out to vulnerable families and children. The key role of this position would be to engage families in the early childhood service system. We believe this form of outreach is currently utilised within the school system and CCC proposes that similar resourcing be offered to children's services in Victoria.

- These outreach workers could also facilitate integration between early childhood education and care services and other health and wellbeing services that families access throughout a child's early years; this could include Maternal and Child Health and early intervention services. This initiative could build on the 'key worker' role in early intervention for children with special needs.

The precise nature of the measures is best decided at a local level to ensure local solutions are tailored to local circumstances.

Integration of early childhood education, care, health and family support services

Integration of early childhood education and care with health and welfare services is a proven strategy to ensure that vulnerable children and families have streamlined and non-stigmatising access to the services they need.

In Victoria there are 100 integrated children's centres providing early childhood education and care, maternal and child health and other child and family services such as early intervention, family support and/or counselling services. Other services build integrated responses through strong professional relationships and seamless referral systems. These integrated services are much better able to respond to the needs of vulnerable children and families than stand alone services designed to meet a single purpose only.

CCCH refers to 'integrating services [as] the process of building connections between services of different types so as to create a system that is more comprehensive and cohesive as well as services being more accessible and more responsive'.¹⁰ Integration can contribute to these goals by:

- Making services easier to access for children and families
- Enabling professionals to collaborate across disciplines
- Reducing fragmentation in service delivery
- Increasing capacity to respond to diverse and changing needs
- Enabling families and children to receive seamless holistic education, care, health and welfare services

The hallmarks of integrated child and family services are:

¹⁰ Centre for Community Child Health (2009) *Integrating Services for Young Children and their Families*, Policy Brief 17, p1 available online www.rch.org.au/ccch/policybriefs.cfm

- Shared physical space (a building or a precinct)
- Shared information, in a climate of trust and respect
- Shared resources such as enrolment forms, planning days, funds, etc
- A shared vision (including a commitment to improving the qualitative experiences of integrated support, especially among children and their families)
- Cross disciplinary collaboration between the different professionals who work in the service

CCC calls on the Inquiry to support continued investment by the Victorian Government in capital infrastructure to support integrated services which meet;

- the needs of all families in a neighbourhood, including the most vulnerable,
- the interrelated health, education and social needs of each child in a family, and
- the interrelated needs of all members of the family.

Investing in a skilled workforce including investing in leaders for integrated services is another key element to ensuring children's services are well placed to assist in identifying, engaging and effectively working with vulnerable children and families.

There is a common misperception that co-ordinators of services which make up the mix of child and family services can simply extend their normal role to support the development of new ways of governing, managing and delivering services and engaging the community in an integrated setting. Experience has shown that the skills of leading this kind of fundamental culture change are very different to those required to co-ordinate a child care service, or a maternal and child health service for example. Further the workload associated with creating new models is significant and cannot be successfully managed on top of the busy and demanding role of co-ordinating components of the service.

A specialised integrated services manager position greatly enhances the capacity of specialists within an integrated service to work in an integrated way.

Training for early childhood educators

CCC recommends the Inquiry Panel investigate the potential for the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership to develop a Community Participation Leadership program designed for services which are covered by the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. The Bastow Institute is actively involved in building the skills of the early childhood education and care sector; our proposed program would ensure that this program specifically focuses on how to engage and retain vulnerable families.

A key area where government could take a lead is to ensure early childhood education and care services and other allied health services that have contact and relationships with vulnerable families and children are well educated on what to look for and how to help.

CCC welcomes the requirement in the Education and Care Services National Regulations Exposure Draft that education and care services staff must be advised of current child protection law and any obligations they may have under the law; further a sub regulation requires that training on the law and obligations is undertaken¹¹. Given early childhood educators are not mandated to report suspected cases of abuse and neglect, this training should clarify the duty of care and develop a deep understanding of vulnerability and how to engage, include and build relationships with vulnerable children and families. The training should also demystify the process of involving protective services in suspected cases of abuse and neglect and ensure services focus on the best interests of the child. Greater education is essential to ensure interventions are well timed and in the best interest of the child.

Outside School Hours Care services

Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) services support children's learning before and after school as well as in vacation periods; this is another service platform that with resourcing and support can be important in early intervention for children and families at risk of abuse.

OSHC services can offer continuity for families and children in moving into the school system from the early childhood service system, and can offer valuable respite for families facing hardship.

OSHC services might be the only point of contact with the school for parents, guardians or carers; the unique nature of the service means OSHC educators can be better placed than classroom teachers or a School Principal to build a trusting relationship with vulnerable children and families. They are another potential point of early detection and quick referral into support services in the broader community when required.

Investing in OSHC Coordinators to enhance the integration of school and care and enhance stability for families as children move from early childhood services into

¹¹ National Regulations Exposure Draft (2011) Proposed Regulation 94; The National Regulations will be binding on Victoria's long day care, outside school hours care and family day care services, available online; http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Policy_Agenda/Pages/DraftNQFRegDocs.aspx

schools can offer important connections, with the broader community for vulnerable children and families. The Bastow Institute mentioned above could also be utilised to develop a program for OSHC educators tailored to their unique context of being situated within schools.

3. The quality, structure, role and functioning of:

- a) family services**
- b) statutory child protection services, including reporting, assessment, investigation procedures and responses; and**
- c) out-of-home care, including permanency planning and transitions; and what improvements may be made to better protect the best interests of children and support better outcomes for children and families**

Family services are enhanced when they work collaboratively with children's services to ensure that vulnerable families are linked in with universal early childhood education and care as well as Outside School Hours Care. The children's services benefit from on-going information and skill exchange with family services to build and maintain knowledge of each other's expertise and the complementarities of the services.

4. The interaction of departments and agencies, the courts and service providers and how they can better work together to support at-risk families and children.

CCC believes that a whole of government approach is critical in supporting and modelling integrated service responses. This will minimise the 'chaos' that can currently be replicated by the protective system to the detriment of children and families¹².

A coalition of community agencies including Berry Street, Domestic Violence Victoria, the Victorian Child Care Agency, CCC and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare has proposed a Vulnerable Children's Framework to act as a 'circuit breaker' in the cycle of abuse and neglect by placing children at the centre of reforms and investing wisely. This framework is available on the CCC website www.cccinc.org.au

The Vulnerable Children's Framework proposes a State Government Office for Children to lead the development and implementation of the Vulnerable Children's Framework across all State government portfolios. The framework should be developed by the Minister for Children with the support of a well resourced Office for Children preferably

¹² Perry, B 'Applying Principles of Neurodevelopment to Clinical Work with Maltreated and Traumatized Children' p29 Chapter 3 in Webb, N (Ed) (2006) *Working with Traumatized Youth in Child Welfare*, The Guildford Press, NY

located within the Premier's Department. An Office for Children would provide the focus to drive cross portfolio reforms relating to children's development, education, health, safety and wellbeing.

Recognising the community wide responsibility for children's wellbeing, the detail of the framework should be developed and monitored by a high level board with senior government, community sector and specialist expertise. This approach would enhance policy leadership and collaboration for the first time bringing together senior policy makers from the family violence, child development, early learning and care, Indigenous community and child welfare sectors.

5. *The appropriate roles and responsibilities of government and non government organisations in relation to Victoria's child protection policy and systems.*

In the terms of reference there is a mention of the rise of 'for profit' organisations in the sector and CCC urges caution in permitting a mixed economy for child protection.

CCC does not believe that profit should be made from children. In opening up a mixed economy for protection services the focus of the intervention moves from care to profit which is not in the best interests of children.

CCC concern stems from our experience within the children's services sector and the detrimental impact of opening children's services up to a competitive private market. Significant damage was done to the children's services sector after it was opened up to the contestable market as evidenced by decreased quality, loss of public confidence and a concern for profits rather than children. The same outcomes would occur within child protection services should for profit companies be permitted to enter into the mix of services.

A 2006 study into child care quality noted 'it is not 'for-profit' status itself which is the problem, but the pressure that corporate chains are under to pursue business objectives, even if it is at the expense of humanist concerns'.¹³ The study recommended that in the child care sector funds be directed to community based child care centres to 'promote higher quality care and reduce the scope for the corporate ethos to undermine the objective of quality care.'¹⁴

¹³ Rush, E (April 2006) *Child Care Quality in Australia* Discussion Paper Number 84, The Australia Institute, xi

¹⁴ *ibid*

The cost of fees often exclude vulnerable families from high quality early childhood education and care. Special Child Care Benefit is a crucial resource provided by the Commonwealth Government to cover child care fees for children at risk. Maintenance and expansion of financial support such as Special Child Care Benefit is an important role of government.

6. Possible changes to the processes of the courts referencing the recent work of and options put forward by the Victorian Law Reform Commission.

7. Measures to enhance the government's ability to;

- **Plan for future demand for family services, statutory child protection services and out-of-home care; and**
- **Ensure a workforce that delivers services of a high quality to children and families.**

Development and maintenance of a highly skilled professional workforce for children's services is a key strategy to deliver for vulnerable children. The children's services workforce needs significant reform in order to deliver.

CCC welcomes the introduction of a minimum training standard for all people working in children's services in the Education and Care Services National Regulations Exposure Draft. We also welcome the improved staff:child ratios and qualification levels required for all educators - research has shown that these changes will improve learning and developmental outcomes for young children with maximum benefit to the children at risk of abuse and neglect who participate in high quality early learning programs. CCC supports initiatives of colleagues in the child welfare sector which aim to improve the skills and knowledge of people working with children and families in identifying and responding to abuse and neglect; we call on government to invest in strategies such as:

- Berry Street – Foundations for Practice
Training for all staff working at Berry Street, including administration and professional staff, covering child development, resilience, attachment, trauma and an ecological approach.
- Knowledge Exchange Strategy run by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare
Funded by DEECD with DHS-funded Early Childhood Coordinator positions in each ChildFIRST region to encourage a collaborative, multi-agency approach between the early years and family services workforce around working with vulnerable children; pilots are being conducted in 2010/2011.

8. The oversight and transparency of the child protection, care and support system and whether changes are necessary in oversight, transparency and/or regulation to achieve an increase in public confidence and improved outcomes for children.

CCC believes that an independent Children and Young Person's Commission is crucial. By being independent the Commission will be politically unencumbered in upholding the rights of children in Victoria. CCC believes that such a Commission should be underpinned by a commitment to listen to the voices of children.

This submission previously mentioned that universal children's services and schools in which OSHC services are provided are well located within the community to provide Child Protection workers with valuable and essential information concerning children and families. Further it is important that these vital service collaborations are established to strengthen the service system for vulnerable children and families.

In building these relationships, CCC believes there should be a process for reciprocal transparency so that educators in early childhood settings are informed of the context from which children are coming to the service to better assist in meeting the children's specific needs.

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