

'Think Outside the Box'

Response to the Queensland Child Protection Commission
of Inquiry Discussion Paper – February 2013



Prepared by

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Disclaimer

This submission has been prepared by Ms Jatinder Kaur (author), Director of JK Diversity Consultants and is based on her personal experience as frontline child safety officer, researcher and policy officer whilst being employed with the Department of Child Safety (2006-2009). The views in this submission reflect those of the author and feedback from current and former employees of Child Safety Services (who wished to not be identified for fear of being reprimanded). This submission will focus on a 'paradigm shift in child protection system'.

Previous submissions to the QCPCI:

1. 'Workplace bullying issues facing child protection workers', submitted on 3 September 2012, this submission was not published online on QCPCI website.
2. 'Cultural competence in child protection and the needs of CALD children and families that come to the attention of Qld child protection system', submitted on 8 November 2012, published on QCPCI website:

http://www.childprotectioninquiry.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/170099/JK_Diversity_Consultants_Jatinder_Kaur_submission.pdf

Biography: Jatinder Kaur

Jatinder Kaur is the director of JK Diversity Consultants. In 2007, she conducted the first research which explored child protection assessment frameworks used when working with CALD families in the child protection system and developed the Cross Cultural Child Protection Survey (CCCPs). She has published two papers: *Children Australia* (32:4, 2007) and *Developing Practice* (Issue 23, 2009). She was filmed in the DVD on 'Cross Cultural Practice in Social Work and Human Services' developed by Griffith University. In November 2011 she was appointed as an independent expert panel member to the Australian Government's 'Access & Equity Inquiry' which is part of the Australian Government's Multicultural Policy initiative, the A & E report is available online: <http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/a-multicultural-australia/government-approach/government-services/AandEreport.pdf>. On 12 July 2012, she launched the '**Cultural Diversity and Child Protection**' Research Report, this report is the first publication of its kind to review the available research literature on the CALD and refugee families in the Australian Child Protection System (CPS), which is available online: http://www.jkdiversityconsultants.com.au/Cultural_Diversity_&_Child_Protection_Kaur2012_A4.pdf

‘Think outside the Box’

As an independent entity I have the autonomy to advocate and state issues as I observe them. Having previously worked for the Department of Child Safety and also in Qld Government funded NGOs (OOHC and family support services). I have a unique perspective of working across the universal, secondary and tertiary child and family welfare systems in Qld and also expertise in working with CALD communities (as outlined in earlier submission). I also bring the ‘research perspective’ and have been actively engaged in further research and academia pursuits across Australia.

I will not be addressing all 47 Questions as posed in the Discussion paper, however I will respond to key areas of need that I am more qualified to comment upon and which I believe have not been explored or examined in detail.

‘Funding for the child protection system’

In a time of neo-liberal conservative government (LNP) it has been very interesting, challenging and tumultuous 12 months for the community sector in Queensland, where a number of agencies have been decommissioned, reduced funding and ‘gag orders’ placed on service agreements. It is very difficult for funded agencies to build ‘collaborative partnerships, innovative practice’ in a climate of ‘fear and retribution’ by the funding body (LNP Government). This climate of fear also impacts on both frontline child protection workers and funded agencies in their ability to focus on providing ‘quality services’ to Queensland’s most vulnerable children and families. I believe that this ‘fear’ is impacting on the community sector’s ability to state their ‘true’ feelings and their capacity to provide responses to the QCPCI Discussion paper (without the fear of being defunded or reprimanded by the Department!).

I strongly believe that in Queensland we need to transition to a reduction in the role of statutory ‘Child Safety Services’ and expand the investment into primary and secondary services to meet the needs of vulnerable families. QCPCI have received numerous submissions clearly stating the case of the under-investment in secondary and early intervention services across Queensland.

We need to shift our thinking (Government & Departmental Bureaucrats) from ‘Child Rescue & Protection’ to ‘Family Support & Preservation model’, ***the Pendulum must shift.***

If we are truly examining efficiencies and ensuring that the most vulnerable clients are being serviced then we need to shift the balance and the funding model. I believe that the role of the Department of Communities – Child Safety Services should be significantly reduced to be the primary functions of:

- Frontline Child Protection services role of Intake and Investigation & Assessment, specialist Joint investigation team for sexual abuse cases with Queensland Police.
- Central Office role of monitoring of funded agencies and services, quality assurance and strategic policy.



Diagram 1: a 'new' child protection system model for Qld

Rationale:

- According to the QCPCI Discussion paper, the Queensland Government has spent \$735.5 million on direct child protection services in 2011-12, which is an increase of 302% from the \$182.3 million in 2003-04 (p10).
- Despite all of this 'investment' the number of children coming into OOHC in Qld has risen from 3,257 in 2002 to 7,999 in 2012.
- Number of notifications has risen to 22,894 notifications in 2011-12, 34% were substantiated after investigation and assessment.
- Previous child protection inquiries (Forde and CMC) identified that many children and young people had experienced harm, when they entered the OOHC system.

We need to explore 'New solutions' and 'Think outside the Box' in tackling issues of child abuse and neglect and refocus on 'prevention, early intervention and family preservation'.

Recommendation 1:

Qld Government reduce the role of Child Safety Services and consider outsourcing and transferring the following functions of:

- Case management of children and young people on child protection orders (short term/long term) to the funded Out-of-home care (OOHC) agencies.
- Intervention with Parental Agreement cases transferred to funded Intensive Family Support Services (IFSS).
- Young people aged 15 years to specialist Transition from care funded agency.
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) children and young people transferred to ATSI specific funded OOHC agencies.
- Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children and young people are transferred to CALD specific funded agency.
- Research and evaluation functions outsourced to the University sector or specialist consultancy services.

Role of Intake

Since 2009, I have been a member of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 'Common Approach to Assessment, Referral and Support (CAARS) Taskforce and Member of evaluation working group with ARACY. The CAARS approach is a way for universal service providers to identify children who may need help and to help connect them to the support they need. It is a flexible, grassroots way of preventing child neglect and abuse by building on the strengths of the child, the child's family and the broader community. The Common Approach has been used by child and maternal health nurses, GPs, teachers, child care workers, family support workers, mental health and allied health professionals, family dispute resolution practitioners, case managers and a range of others. ARACY put in a submission to QCPCI advocating for the Qld government to consider adopting its use.

Recommendation 2:

Queensland Government to adopt the CAARS tools and implement them as part of whole of government child abuse prevention strategy.

Develop a Child Abuse Prevention Strategy

It is widely acknowledged within the research literature that there are common risk factors that bring families to the attention of child protection system, which include domestic and family violence, substance abuse and mental illness (Bromfield, Lamont, Parker and Horsfall, 2010), along with socioeconomic disadvantage.

The QCPCI have received numerous submissions discussing the various factors that bring vulnerable families to the attention of child protection. It is critical as part of this 10 year road map that the Queensland Government reduce the demand on the tertiary child protection system. One proposal would be to shift the thinking to a 'Child Abuse Prevention model' and invest in services which tackle

domestic and family violence, substance misuse and mental illness and socioeconomic disadvantage (poverty, affordable housing). In 2012, I attended the 19th International Society Prevention of Child Abuse & Neglect (ISPCAN) & International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect research conference in Istanbul, the key messages from the eminent International scholars was that across the western developed countries not enough research had been done focusing on '**Preventing child abuse and neglect**' and there was real need to refocus on developing strategies on Early intervention and prevention of child maltreatment.

Recommendation 3: Queensland Government to develop a Whole of Government Child Abuse Prevention Strategy, incorporating other key initiatives of 'Early years strategy', Domestic Violence strategy, Tackling homelessness, Youth offending, Mental health Plan, Drugs & Substance misuse. This strategy should include key performance indicators on achieving outcomes and measuring reductions of reports in child abuse and neglect across Qld.

Working with children & young people in OOHC

Currently in Queensland there are multiple agencies and caseworkers 'working' with children and young people (there is an assumption that children and young people have a regular caseworker/child safety officer). These multiple workers/agencies include:

- Child Safety officer – Department of Communities – Child Safety Services
- Community Visitor – CCYPCG (visit once a month)
- OOHC funded agency – works with foster carer and conducts home visits
- Recognised Entity – if child is ATSI (dependent on availability of service/catchment area)

Other key professionals may include:

- Youth worker (in Residential facility)
- Psychologist/Counsellor (if linked with CYMHS or funded counselling service)
- Youth Justice caseworker (if on dual child protection & youth justice order)
- Teacher (if attending and getting additional support)
- CREATE Foundation (voluntary involvement if linked with them).

However the reality is that many children and young people do not have a 'single worker' who can provide them with **continued, ongoing casework support**. The QCPCI discussion paper has highlighted issues around multiple placements, multiple caseworkers, and the first hand experience of children and young people in OOHC. It is clear that for children and young people who have experienced child maltreatment they require a skilled caseworker who they can go to for:

- Support, guidance and mentoring
- Linking in with specialist support (e.g. mental health assessment)
- Referral to services/recreational activities
- Assistance with developing life skills and transition to independence

Recommendation 4: Queensland Government to transfer case management of children and young people on child protection orders to funded OOHC agencies and build capacity in NGO sector to meet the needs of children and young people who have experienced child abuse and neglect.

Workforce Development

My experience from working within Child Safety Services for 3 years, has informed me of the various issues facing frontline staff, and recruitment and retention of skilled practitioners. Feedback was also provided by current and former child safety officers who wished to not be identified.

Question 26:

If the Qld Government shift the paradigm and outsources OOHC case management, this will lead to savings for the government in frontline child protection workers. Child Safety Services would be in a stronger position to be more stringent with the recruitment of child protection officers, including mandatory tertiary qualifications in Social work, Psychology, Human Services or Behavioural Science and 2 years experience of working with children & families. Child Safety Services must move away from recruiting new graduates as they have limited experience, skills and knowledge of working with complex, multi-problem families and traumatised children and young people. The Department to introduce 2 classification roles:

- Level 1 – Child Protection Officer (PO 3 level)
- Level 2 – Senior Child Protection Officer (PO 5)

During my experience working within Child Safety Services I was very concerned when staff were employed from non- human service backgrounds (e.g. teachers, police officers) as this had major influence on their skills, engagement and understanding of working with vulnerable families.

Recruitment of frontline staff could also be outsourced or undertaken by a specialist recruitment agency, which would ensure that the 'right calibre' of practitioners were being employed (It has been my experience that there is wide spread cronyism and 'jobs for your mates' within the various offices and regions, as the recruitment of permanent positions is done internally by the Manager, with very little external oversight or fairness). This outsourcing of recruitment activities would also ensure that staffs within child safety service centres were not being taken off line on a regular basis as part of coordinating recruitment processes.

Other cost efficiencies would be for Queensland Government to provide access to the latest technology, for example if frontline staff were provided with I-Pads and I-Phone, they could record notes as they conducted home visits and take photographs (for court evidence). This would reduce the double up of typing hand written notes onto the ICMS system. There are Apps available which can convert text-to-speech into word documents.

Another option would be to allow more flexibility of work hours and change the structure of 'child protection work hours' to be in shifts:

1. 7am – 2pm,
2. 2pm -8pm,
3. Night shift 8pm-7am,

This would allow for more effective child protection service delivery, deal with crisis situations and reduce the cost of 'after hours services' provided by police, hospital, DV services.

Question 28: Training

Child Safety Services should reinstate funding for the Graduate Certificate in Child Protection which was a key initiative in up-skilling frontline staff (CMC recommendation). I personally completed this course from the University of Queensland (James Cook provided this course in North Qld), as a new employee with Child Safety and found this course was much more helpful and informative in comparison to the 12 week mandatory child safety officer training that was delivered by Child Safety Service staff. I believe that it is important to recognise and emphasis that child protection work is very specialised and requires a high skill set to deal with complex vulnerable families.

The Queensland Government could establish a Centre for Excellence in Child & Family Welfare or provide funding for a Centre of Child Wellbeing situated with a Queensland University. This centre would be accessible by both frontline child protection workers and NGO staff and would provide:

- Professional Development and Training Seminars on various topics relevant to child protection practice (e.g. OOHC, Therapeutic work, Cross Cultural Practice and Mental Health)
- Practice Support, Coaching and mentoring to staff (Qld and NGO sector).
- Access to professional external supervision.
- Undertake program evaluation and practice research on various areas of interest within child protection continuum.

Question 30:

Child Safety Services needs to provide access to external professional supervision (in my experience this was most challenging aspect when I had Team Leaders who were incompetent/new to the role, and did not provide me with adequate support/supervision/guidance/mentoring during my first 12months).

Recommendation 5: Queensland Government to consider the following initiatives:

1. Recruitment of child protection workers to be undertaken by specialist recruitment agency and mandatory qualifications in: Social Work, Psychology, Human Services or Behavioral Science and 2 years experience of working with children & families.
2. Establish a Centre for Excellence in Child & Family Welfare or provide funding for a Centre of Child Wellbeing situated with a Queensland University and reinstate the Graduate Certificate in Child Protection.
3. Provide external professional supervision and ongoing training and professional development opportunities for both frontline child protection workers and NGO sector.

Conclusion

Child protection is one of the most challenging professions and has often been described as a 'wicked problem' with very few solutions. The QCPCI has a once in a lifetime opportunity to undertake a proactive, innovative approach to forensically examine the current Queensland child protection system. I strongly believe that we need to 'shift the paradigm' and move away from risk-averse practice and shift our focus from 'child rescue/protection' to 'family support/preservation'. I have drawn on my professional experience (Queensland and Interstate) and observations and have taken a risk in proposing some bold recommendations.

I hope that all the time and effort of my colleagues in the community and academic sectors across Queensland will not go in vain and that the QCPCI will be able to propose a 'New Roadmap' for protecting and supporting the most vulnerable abused children and young people.