



Submission by the Social Work  
Discipline, University of Tasmania

to the

Parliament of Tasmania Select  
Committee on Child Protection

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## **Introduction**

The Social Work discipline at the University of Tasmania (UTas) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliament of Tasmania Select Committee on Child Protection. Given the short time available to respond, this submission addresses some key issues that we believe are relevant to selected Terms of Reference. We would be happy to provide further information regarding the issues raised or to meet with members of the Select Committee.

## **Social Work at the University of Tasmania**

Social Work at UTas provides education, research and consultancy in all areas of social work. With a strong commitment to social justice, our aim is to *learn and work together for social justice and sustainable change*.

Both the Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work (professional qualifying) degrees undertaken at UTas are recognised as accredited minimum qualifications for employment as a professional social worker. These degrees are recognised by employers within Tasmania, nationally and internationally and are the only degrees taught within the state that are recognised by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). In 2010, we will be graduating 50 social workers with a qualifying social work degree. An integral part of the social work curriculum (and a requirement for accreditation of social work courses by the professional body, the Australian Association of Social Work) is extensive coverage of child protection issues and the requirement that graduating students acquire competencies in this field. Students are required to complete 980 hours of field work placement as part of their professional qualification in social work; in 2010, 143 students undertook field work placements in Tasmania across a wide range of human service organisations, including placements in the child protection field. In 2010 for example, eight social work students undertook child protection placements in Southern Tasmania and two students undertook such placements on the North West Coast. We also have many students placed in agencies that strongly interface with statutory child protection services including the Tasmanian Department of Education, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Kennerley Children's Home, Life Without Barriers, Relationships Australia, Sexual Assault Services, and Family Violence Counselling Services.

As well as professional qualifying courses, we offer advanced practice courses for social work practitioners including the Graduate Certificate of Social Work (Advanced Practice), Graduate Diploma of Social Work (Advanced Practice) and Master of Social Work (Advanced Practice). These courses attract social work practitioners, a considerable number of whom are practising in statutory child protection services, schools and Department of Education services. We also offer two higher research degrees in social work: Master of Social Work (Research) and Doctor of Philosophy (Social Work).

The social work research program at UTas is broad and includes areas such as social inclusion, genetic discrimination, mental health, hope, child well-being, disability, gender issues, rural health, marital breakdown, homelessness, social work practice, gambling, ageing, sexual assault, grief and bereavement, palliative care, death and dying, program evaluation, policy analysis, risk, and ethics and morality in social work practice.

## Responses to Terms of Reference

The following section presents the Terms of Reference of the Select Committee and our responses.

To inquire into and report upon the adequacy of Tasmania's child protection systems, including:

**(a) Early identification, intervention and prevention strategies currently in place within all relevant agencies including the Department of Health and Human Services (including Family Support and Child Protection Services), the Office of the Commissioner for Children, Department of Education, Department of Justice, Tasmania Police, and the non-government sector including Gateway service providers, and including comparison with child protection regimes in other Australian jurisdictions.**

- As the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 states, Australia needs to move from seeing 'protecting children' merely as a response to abuse and neglect to one of promoting the safety and wellbeing of children. To do this we need to support vulnerable children and their families and this requires the investment of more resources in primary, secondary and tertiary services for families. Our experience indicates that these services do not come cheaply and they may be required for long periods of time in order to have maximum benefit. This does not necessarily mean establishing new services but rather identifying and building on existing services which could focus on intensive, preventative work with children and families given adequate and continuing resources. The provision of social work services in the Tasmanian Department of Education is one such example. Tasmania is one of the few states in Australia to employ qualified social workers in its educational systems. However, those social workers are spread so thinly across so many schools that it is simply not possible to provide adequate services to the many children whose behaviour and learning capacities are seriously impaired by complex and dysfunctional family experiences. Further, effective prevention strategies cannot be developed, implemented and evaluated when resources do not extend beyond social workers need to attend to immediate and pressing needs of children and families.
- The capacity of social workers in child protection services to effectively engage in the 'core business' of working *with* families and children in order to support and increase their capacity and their potential is being impacted upon by current organisational and procedural requirements regarding risk assessment and risk management. Establishing and maintaining relationships with families and children, which is fundamental to effective intervention, takes time and requires consistency of workers, both of which are jeopardised by current child protection service delivery models. Changing such frameworks do not necessarily require additional resources but rather new approaches and ways of approaching service delivery and practices. There is an increasing literature that documents that a persistent focus on risk, or what might go wrong in the future, detracts from the immediate needs of people in the present. As we have seen recently in the Tasmanian context, as well as all other Australian states at various times, child protection systems that are predominantly characterised by risk assessment and management are not necessarily meeting goals regarding ensuring child safety and protection. While risk assessment is clearly an important consideration in child protection practice, other aspects of social workers' professional practice appear to be being lost in favour of procedural and actuarial requirements. As McAuliffe and Chenoweth (2008, pp. 38-39) note the

- Social workers in a range of frontline services play a role in maintaining a level of connection between young people who have disengaged from the child protection system and the workers who have delegated responsibility for the care and wellbeing of these young people. The knowledge and skills specific to social work and the location of social workers across many front line agencies mean they are ideally placed to engage these young people, and to provide the support that the formal child protection system is not always able to do.
- There are strategies in place under the new Tasmanian Homelessness Plan (2010 – 2013) to prevent and intervene early in homelessness in Tasmania. Many of the actions described in this plan have the potential to improve the station of young people who are at risk of homelessness, with specific reference made to young people transitioning from the child protection system, and those exiting the youth justice system. New Gateway services are now established to provide support to families; financial counselling; assessment of housing need and provision. Social work has an important contribution to make in ensuring the success of the actions in the plan for which DCYFS has responsibility.
- It is noted that the funding application and reporting requirements of community-based organisations that are funded by government departments can be onerous in terms of the detail of information required and frequency. This can impact significantly upon the stability and long term planning of such services, the satisfaction of workers, the continuity of service provision and the ongoing relationships with families.

**(b) Mechanisms currently in place, and where improvements can be made to enhance the integration between all relevant agencies to ensure that the welfare of any identified child at risk is paramount and that all agencies work together to provide best practice care and service delivery.**

- The framework of human service delivery in itself can be a risk factor for adding to the hardship of children and families who are in need of such services. Models of human service delivery can therefore contribute to, or ameliorate, the degree to which families become or remain entrenched in welfare systems and in geographic localities of disadvantage; such localities are clearly evident in Tasmania (Social Inclusion Unit 2009). Silo-based' portfolios for service delivery, whereby responsibility for specified areas lies with discrete, stand-alone government departments such as child protection, income security, housing, family violence and juvenile justice have a long tradition, with administrative logic and benefit. Such a

- The need for developing pathways and mechanisms for integrative and collaborative approaches to service delivery across different regions and communities is important. Further, seeking the input of community members and consumers of services is an integral component in these processes. The Area Advisory Group mechanisms that are currently being implemented by the Department of Health and Human Services are commendable in their intention to provide opportunities for increased communication between services and practitioners as well as for community and stakeholder input. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the success of the Area Advisory Groups and the communities they serve will be important regarding effectiveness of communication across services, ongoing levels of community engagement, practitioner satisfaction and ultimately, the actual outcomes for children and families within these communities who use the services. The current contracting of services into the community sector in Tasmania has the potential to increase complexity and fragmentation in service delivery; for children and families who use and interact with such services, this could add significant confusion and increased hardship. Well designed monitoring and evaluation of services as well as empirical research involving a range of stakeholder groups will be very important.

- Findings from a recent UTas BSW with Honours research study (2009), “Moving Towards Professional Collaboration: Understanding the Barriers Between Departmental and Community Based Child Protection Services”, suggest that while the importance of good information flow and professional collaboration between departmental based child protection services and other community based welfare professionals is clear, welfare professionals currently hold a negative view of the departmental child protection services and its staff and this hampers collaboration. On a positive note, the study found that welfare professionals in this study expressed a willingness to move towards addressing these issues and becoming agents for change themselves. The study recommended:

- The development and provision of integrated interagency education sessions and training days for all professionals and organisations;
- The implementation of a feedback mechanism/procedure within the Child Protection services and between welfare professionals in other agencies and organisations to ensure that the knowledge and experience of all workers, including those a ‘ground level’ are listened to, respected and considered in planning and decision making;
- The evaluation of risk-based procedures with a consideration of the benefits of a strengths approach through exploring the possibility of fully implementing the “Signs of Safety” approach and addressing the use of the “Tasmanian Risk Framework”.
- A review of the recruitment processes within Child Protection to ensure credibility of their role.

It has also been suggested that the focus in recruitment of child protection workers should be on rigorous procedures in order to locate the best applicants; that is qualified, preferably in social work, and with experience. This does not need to be in

experience in child protection but applicants should be able to demonstrate high level skills including oral and written communication, assessment, planning and intervention skills, relevant to working with children and families and across agencies. This does not preclude the employment of new graduates; however this should be done within a new graduates' program which includes orientation, continuing professional development, supervision and mentoring.

Also useful would be the establishment of procedures for fixed term secondments of workers within government and non-government agencies for professional development purposes but particularly to increase understanding of how agencies respond to child protection concerns and to promote respect and communication between workers.

- The importance and necessity for increased collaborative communication and jointly conducted practices between child protection services and Department of Education Social Workers is highlighted extensively in the recent report by the Commissioner for Children following the inquiry into the circumstances of a 12 year old child under guardianship of the Secretary, October 10. The importance of collaborative work across child protection services and School Social Workers as well as across a range of community-based services and practitioners has been strongly emphasised following the Commissioner's Inquiry.

- Child protection work is complex and best practice responses are known to rely on the cooperation and collaboration of government and non government agencies, and the skills. One of the less well recognised roles that social workers fill is in working with young people at risk, many of whom are formally in the care of child protection agencies. This role is significant in the context of the present Tasmanian inquiry into child protection matters. One of the risks associated with being in the child protection system is an elevated risk of becoming homeless (either while in care or at some later stage). Young people are at particular risk when they make the transition from care to independent living, especially when transitions are unsupported (or inadequately supported) by child protection agencies. This risk is now well recognised by most jurisdictions in Australia, and well documented in the research literature<sup>1</sup>.

Young people living on the street are vulnerable for many reasons, and in a number of ways. Their lack of life experience can make them vulnerable to sexual and financial exploitation. Difficulty in accessing income through Centrelink can mean that some engage in sex as a way of supporting themselves. They are often unaware of their rights and unable to access safe and secure accommodation. Inability to continue study increases their lifelong vulnerability to unemployment and social exclusion. Many highly at risk young people also disengage from formal systems of care, including the child protection system, because they feel a profound sense of disappointment or mistrust as a result of previous interactions with the system.

These young people also have a range of needs related to the issues which may have led to their being in the child protection system (such as sexual abuse, physical abuse and family violence) and to the issues which are the result of the aftermath of these traumatic events (such as mental health issues and substance misuse).

Social workers often play a critical role in supporting these vulnerable young people because of their roles in youth services and, increasingly, schools. These roles include:

- identifying young people at risk;

- assisting at risk young people (especially those who have disengaged from formal systems) in the child protection system through transitions;
- preventing and intervening early in homelessness;
- assessing need;
- connecting young people to services;
- advocating for social justice and the social inclusion of young people;
- navigating service systems and maintaining cross agency linkages;
- supporting young people to continue with schooling; and
- mentoring young people at risk in the absence of other adult role models.

Social workers are often the point of first contact for young people at risk, including young people sleeping out and/or sofa surfing and dependent on friends' families or opportunistic relationships for their survival and safety. Social work is also involved in programs such as Reconnect which aim to reconnect young people with their families (where this is appropriate). Social workers in frontline services also play a key role in maintaining some level of connection between young people who have disengaged from the child protection system and the workers who have delegated responsibility for the care and wellbeing of these young people.

Social work for these reasons is positioned to play a key role in integrating responses and case planning across agencies with responsibility for the care and protection of children. This role is of particular importance for children who have already disengaged from formal care systems and who are at high risk of homelessness and exploitation.

### **Other long term contributors to child abuse and neglect, such as poverty, drug and alcohol misuse and mental health issues**

As has been argued in the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*, many factors contribute to child abuse and neglect and research suggests that these include:

- domestic violence
- parental alcohol and drug abuse
- parental mental health problems.

They also include factors relating to the broader challenges of exclusion and disadvantage such as:

- poverty and social isolation
- unstable family accommodation and homelessness
- poor child and maternal health
- childhood disability, mental health and/or behavioural problems
- young people disconnected from their families, schools and communities

- past experiences of trauma.

Adult treatment or support services – particularly those addressing domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health issues, as well as housing, gambling, disability, employment and income support services – need to be more child-focused, and responsive to the needs of families. In addition, it is important to address disadvantage (for example, overcrowded and inadequate housing); recognise and promote family, community and cultural strengths that protect children; and to develop community-wide strategies to address specific risk factors where they occur in high concentration, such as alcohol misuse and family violence (National Framework, 2009).

Speaking generally, factors that impinge upon child wellbeing and safety are multiple and complex; they are beyond, simply, 'the personal'. The limits of taking a 'deficits-based' and individualised approach for working with children and families, particularly within the context of statutory work are well documented (Turnell & Edwards, 1999; Tilbury et. al., 2007; Arney & Scott, 2010). Factors that impinge on child wellbeing and safety reflect social, cultural, economic and political dimensions of people's lives and therefore each of these domains, and their diverse configurations, needs to be considered in a systematic and thoughtful way to improve the situation of children and families. This requires the investment of resources across the multiple environments that are meaningful to the promotion of children's safety and their wellbeing, such as the provision of appropriate and affordable housing, access to quality education, access to good and plentiful food, a responsive legal system, providing parents' with financial security, access to quality and affordable health and dental care, and providing crisis and long-term support services alongside of other welfare services as needed. The investment of resources across these domains includes developing the capacity of the workforce within these areas to identify and respond meaningfully to the broader context in which children's safety and wellbeing can be located.

The discipline of social work is well-placed to contribute to the capacity of the child protection workforce given its professional orientation of working with people in the context of their environments to promote individual and social wellbeing. A particular strength of social work also is its focus on understanding, assessing and responding to complex and multi-faceted social problems such as those typically relating to people receiving child protection services, many of whom experience long-standing and cumulative social disadvantage.

**The appropriateness, and need for, any further inquiry including but not limited to a Commission of Inquiry as established under the Commissions of Inquiry Act 1995; and**

Extensive work has been undertaken in regard to these issues and challenges across Australia and in Tasmania. There have already been reviews of child protection services in Tasmania, for example, as undertaken by KPMG several years ago. Statutory services are undergoing significant changes and reorganisation, including contracting out of services through the Gateway process and to other community-based organisations. A useful first stage might be to undertake a systematic 'review of the reviews' that have already been undertaken with a focus on evaluating the status of all recommendations that have come out of these reviews. Establishing and implementing rigorously designed evaluations of the effectiveness of current models of service delivery including Gateway services, for improving the safety and wellbeing of children, are warranted.

## **Other matters incidental thereto**

### ***Child protection services workforce***

- A major barrier to enhancing child protection systems in Tasmania has been problems in recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce. UTas would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department in developing a strategy and training/education programs to train and retain high quality and dedicated human service professionals, including social workers. There are three components to this:

- training new social workers and contributing to the training of other human service personnel;
- upgrading the qualifications of child protection and other human service workers providing services to children and families who do not have a social work qualification with the AASW accredited Child Protection Practice Standards a useful model.
- the ongoing professional development of existing social work and human service practitioners.

- Whilst we recognise the need for recruitment from a range of disciplines to meet the demand for an increasing number of workers, we strongly argue that social work should be the preferred entry qualifications to the child protection system, both in government and in the community sector. Social workers undertake studies in sociology, psychology, social policy, child, adult and family development, mental health, intellectual disability issues and the law as it applies to child protection. The particular strength of social work education is its focus on understanding, assessing and responding to complex social problems such as those reflected in child protection services. Social workers are recognised throughout the world as the core professional group in child protection policy, management and practice.

The UTas social work qualifying courses are accredited by the Australian Association of Social Workers which has developed curriculum standards on child protection. All accredited social work programs at Australian Universities will now need to show that their graduates meet these high and uniform standards. Social work students, as part of their training, also complete substantial periods of supervised practice in a range of health and community service settings, and these often include child protection services.

- Increased numbers of field placements for social work students can be an effective mechanism for contributing to workforce shortages in the child protection field. Field education placements provide an important opportunity for students as workforce preparation; the advantage appears to be strongest when graduates are employed within the specific field in which they have substantial placement experience (Healy and Lonne 2010) For example, Healy and Meagher's (2007, cited in Healy & Lonne 2010) study of child protection workers found that workers who had completed a substantial placement, of at least 250 hours, in this field of practice during their study program rated themselves as well prepared for child protection practice, whereas workers with the same qualifications but who had not undertaken placement in this field, rated themselves as relatively poorly prepared for this type of work.

- Fair and equitable salaries for workers are also important. Community based organisations that employ under the Community Services Award generally pay

- Findings from child protection services in other parts of Australia also indicate that the current overwhelming focus on surveillance, hazard detection and risk assurance will continue to prevent people who have the required knowledge, skills and experience from staying in the child protection workforce, often regardless of workforce strategies. It is the desire to help children and families (even where removal from home is the most appropriate intervention) and to work collaboratively with others who are also important to children, that attracts well balanced, highly skilled, ethically motivated and resilient people to work in human service areas. If they cannot do this, they will look elsewhere for employment that meets their professional needs and orientation. The opportunity for professional social workers to exercise their professional autonomy and discretion in complex areas of decision-making like child protection is an important consideration for practitioners seeking professional development throughout their career and building expertise and research-informed practice.

### ***The development of best practice***

- A 2005 study by UTas researchers Willis and Craft identified the need for a more consistent and theoretically-based practice model in child protection. This study found that best practice should be strengths-based and outcome-focussed. It should emphasise a pro-active approach to the construction of a positive identity for the child by reinforcing the strengths of the child. It should extend to the way that documentation about the child is maintained as well as the training of carers and service providers.

This model should also focus on the development of innovative practices to maintain family contact that is consistent, positive, and promotes a nurturing environment for the child. This should include specific training for carers about the importance of a respectful, helpful and non-judgemental perspective in child/family interactions and support for families to provide a positive experience for children when they have contact.

As already stated, inter-agency collaboration is important and it is essential that this model of practice includes innovative ways to work with the Department of Education, a key agency in ensuring that a range of strategies are implemented to keep children in school; engagement in school is recognised as one of the most protective factors against risk taking behaviours amongst adolescents. This spirit of inter-agency collaboration should be extended to all stakeholders involved with the child.

Finally this model must include consistent practices to meet the child's needs at each critical juncture in a family's/child's experiences with child protection. These critical junctures include: notifications where abuse is not substantiated; notifications where the child is considered at risk; the transition from home to alternative care; the use of challenging behaviours at home and/or school; and placement breakdowns.

The development of a consistent practice model is the first step. It is then important that workers receive ongoing training and support to implement this model. Further, this practice model should be evaluated on an ongoing basis, and this evaluation should be independently audited. UTas can play an important part in this process in joint research projects to develop and pilot parts of a practice model, in training, supervision and evaluation.

### ***The importance of professional supervision***

- It appears increasingly difficult for social workers, including those in statutory child protection services, to be given opportunities for having appropriate professional supervision within their workplace contexts. Anecdotal accounts from practitioners suggest that professional supervision is regarded as a responsibility of workers themselves to organise out of work time rather than a responsibility of the employing organisation. Due to workload pressures at all levels, the supervision of social work practitioners including those 'on the front line' in child protection appears often to be task- and management-focused which, while important from an organisational point of view, does not necessarily meet the ongoing learning and development needs of professional workers. This is particularly important given that such workers can themselves experience stress, vicarious trauma and burnout as a direct result of the nature of their work and the pressures they experience. The risks to both organisations and the people they serve of having professional workers who are not functioning at their optimal levels are not insignificant. Professional supervision can mistakenly be regarded as a 'luxury' experience for workers although it is well documented to be an important factor in the development of expertise and the satisfaction and retention of professional workers. The retention of the child protection workforce is currently a pressing problem in Tasmania, and throughout Australia; retaining a skilled and experienced workforce is critical for human service organisations and has significant economic benefits for such organisations. The importance for children and families of having professional, well-trained and dedicated workers who remain constant cannot be under-stated.

### **Concluding remarks**

Social Work at UTas has contributions to make towards ensuring quality child protection services in Tasmania.

It has a significant role in working with partners in government and community-based organisations, as well as practitioner and consumer sectors, to develop and implement relevant professional training, education and professional development to enhance service delivery and client outcomes.

It also has a strong role in research partnerships, both short and long term, in order to contribute to the evidence-base for high-quality child protection services in Tasmania. There is a pressing need for research and evaluation to ensure that services and interventions provided actually work to improve outcomes for children and families.

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