



Institute of Child Protection Studies

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# **National analysis of workforce trends in statutory child protection**

Institute of Child Protection  
Studies

Australian Catholic University

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The opinions, comments and/or analysis expressed in this document are those of the author or authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian or state and territory governments and cannot be taken in any way as expressions of government policy.

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## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **1.1 Background**

In recognition of the critical importance of workforce issues, 'Building Capacity and Expertise' is a National Priority under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). As part of developing a systematic workforce action plan, on behalf of the Community and Disability Ministerial Advisory Council (CDSMAC), the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) commissioned the Institute of Child Protection Studies (the Institute) at Australian Catholic University to undertake a national analysis of workforce trends and approaches that currently affect Australia's statutory child protection workforce. The analysis aims to answer the following key questions:

- What are the national trends that impact on recruitment and retention in the statutory child protection workforce?
- What successful strategies are employed or will be employed by state and territory governments to recruit, retrain and support the statutory child protection workforce?
- What priorities at jurisdictional and national levels could be considered to further develop the capacity and expertise of the statutory child protection workforce?

Institute staff visited the statutory child protection authorities in each state and territory in April and May, conducting consultations with key stakeholders involved in the recruitment, training and management of the statutory child protection sector. They also distributed a small survey to child protection authorities, with the aim of developing a basic workforce profile. The preliminary results of these consultations were presented to, and workshopped with, FaHCSIA and state and territory representatives on 24 May 2012, in order to assist with the prioritisation of work for consideration as part of the action plan of the National Framework from 2012 to 2020.

### **1.2 Profile of workforce**

The demographic profile at 30 June 2011 was consistent with previous findings on the gender, age and experience level of statutory child protection workers. The majority of workers are female, constituting 84–89% of the workforce. The workforce is generally young, with 25–50% under the age of 35. The proportion with less than 1 year's experience depended on the jurisdiction, with a range of 6% to 20%. A significant proportion, ranging from 27% to 69%, also had more than 5 years' experience in child protection.

### 1.3 Findings of consultations

**National trends.** There were a number of national trends identified which impact upon recruitment and retention: broad structural trends, for example, economic conditions, including downturns and booms; context-specific issues, for example, housing costs in mining areas; competition for workers with other government departments; changing and unpredictable demand for child protection services; reviews and inquiries; restructuring of departments; demographics of the workforce; and negative press about child protection and child protection practitioners.

**Common workforce concerns.** Jurisdictions were commonly concerned about identifying appropriate qualifications for child protection workers. The lack of comparable workforce data across jurisdictions was noticeable.

**Recruitment strategies.** Currently, jurisdictions are employing the following strategies: improved, streamlined recruitment and marketing processes; partnerships with education providers; and international recruitment. Increasingly, it is understood that, if unsuitable staff are recruited, who either do not stay for long or who stay but cannot work effectively, then recruitment is not effective. Where potentially suitable people are recruited but do not stay, the link between recruitment and retention becomes of paramount importance.

**Key recruitment issues across jurisdictions.** There are not enough social workers graduating each year who are considering child protection as a career. Recruitment in regional and remote areas is a major challenge. Difficulties in recruiting Indigenous staff occur across the nation and degree requirements can shut out Indigenous workers.

**Retention strategies.** The aim is to retain the 'right' people for the jobs in order to provide quality services. There are four main categories of retention strategies evident from the consultations with the jurisdictions: incentives; professional development, including core training; building a supportive workplace environment; and job redesign, together with opportunities for career progression.

**Key retention issues across jurisdictions.** Some jurisdictions identified that they still needed to improve retention. More evaluation is needed to determine the extent to which new strategies are working to place the right people in the right jobs and keep them there for the right length of time. It takes time to build positive workplace cultures. If educational providers could offer more qualifications which include child protection-relevant units, child protection authorities would have to do less training of new recruits.

## **1.4 Possible future directions—development of capacity and expertise**

States and territories are developing and implementing retention and recruitment strategies within increasingly sophisticated workforce planning policy environments. Some of the strategies outlined above are relatively new, and, whilst there may be data collection mechanisms in place to evaluate success, it is too soon to do so. One of the tasks of this project was to identify some possible future directions for the development of capacity and expertise of the statutory child protection workforce from a national perspective. The consultation with states and territories, and the workshopping of ideas which occurred on 24 May 2012 with state and territory representatives of the Building Capacity and Expertise National Framework Implementation Working Group Sub-Working Group, form the basis of these possible future directions. Scoping work would be required to advance any of these possibilities, as is outlined below.

**National data development to enable workforce planning.** To undertake sophisticated workforce planning at both state/territory and national levels, comprehensive data are needed. Whilst states and territories have their own data systems, they are not necessarily conducive to the building of a national picture of the child protection workforce (statutory and the wider child protection workforce). With agreed variables and counting rules, such data would facilitate the evaluation of recruitment, retention and workforce development strategies.

**Development of national standards and education, possibly through a national entity.** There was a widely held view that professional leadership is needed for the statutory child protection workforce. Considerable state and territory resources are currently devoted to identifying the qualifications and attributes needed for statutory child protection work and seeking to access these from the supply of workers available. Agreement on the nature of the statutory child protection practitioner role is critical to the identification of these qualities and attributes and to the development of a professional identity for this workforce. Development of a national capability framework and minimum educational standards, and raising a positive profile for child protection practitioners, could be part of this process.

**Para-professional workforce development.** This may be linked with the work of the possible national entity, through the development of a national capability framework. This future direction has potential for addressing the need for greater participation of Indigenous and culturally diverse staff in statutory child protection work and also for freeing up professional workers for complex work with families and children.

**Pre-employment capacity building, particularly for Indigenous young people.** To increase the proportion of Indigenous workers in child protection to the level needed, more work is

required to build pre-employment capacity. It is important that Indigenous communities and stakeholders are engaged early in defining the need for, and the appropriate steps to be taken to forge, educational/employment pathways. Creative approaches are needed to break down existing barriers to educational opportunities and scholarships to create pathways through school to human service work.



## **2. Background and context**

Child protection has undergone significant changes over the past 30 years and is now internationally recognised as one of the most complex and challenging areas of policy and practice in human services. Working in a statutory setting to protect children means practitioners are often working with the most vulnerable families, who may be affected by substance abuse, mental illness, violence, homelessness and/or poverty. The definition of what constitutes child abuse and neglect has changed and broadened over the last decade (Cashmore, 2001; Scott, 2006a). Child protection systems find it difficult to respond effectively to the number of notifications received from mandated reporters and other people in the community who have concerns about children.

There have also been three decades of child death inquiries and other system inquiries and strong media publicity about the failure of child protection systems to deliver certainty about children's safety. This often sensational media reporting has resulted in a loss of public trust in the systems designed to keep children safe, negative views about those who work in child protection, and child protection agencies' feeling under siege. This leads to child protection practice being regarded by some as less attractive to workers, which has led to difficulties in the recruitment and retention of experienced and highly skilled child protection practitioners.

These workforce issues have been recognised for some time, both nationally and internationally. For example, statutory child protection authorities experience high staff turnover; in some Australian jurisdictions, this is as high as 30–40%, and in others, the average length of service is less than three years (Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission, 2004, cited in Healy & Olstedal, 2010, p.258). This high turnover adversely affects caseloads, produces discontinuity of service to families and leads to increased administrative costs. Not having a full quota of skilled and experienced workers stretches the system, and children and their families do not receive the support and protection they need (McArthur, Allen-Kelly, & Duggan, 2006).

However, the construction of child maltreatment is changing and moving away from a narrow risk-management paradigm. A powerful case has been made for early, proactive interventions that assist vulnerable children and their families who would otherwise continue to miss out on the support they need. These changes have workforce implications for statutory child protection services as well as the wider child welfare system. These include questions around the role of statutory child protection in a wider system, recruitment pathways, beginning level and postgraduate qualifications, skill development and the nature of professional support.

## National Statutory Child Protection Workforce Analysis

In recognition of the critical importance of workforce issues, 'Building Capacity and Expertise' is a National Priority under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). This priority has two distinct elements:

1. Support the education, professional development, and retention of the child protection and welfare workforce, including a focus on enabling the Indigenous workforce to be more actively involved in tertiary child protection.
2. The Commonwealth takes a broader human services definition of 'workforce' to look at ways that professionals in a range of fields can contribute to the protection of children, including with cultural sensitivity.

Furthermore, the issue of workforce capacity and the need to actively recruit, train and support Indigenous and other practitioners from diverse backgrounds are matters raised in a range of reviews into child protection systems (Northern Territory Government, 2010; Wood, 2008).

As part of developing a systematic workforce action plan, on behalf of CDSMAC, the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) commissioned the Institute of Child Protection Studies (the Institute) at Australian Catholic University to undertake a national analysis of workforce trends and approaches that currently affect Australia's statutory child protection workforce. The analysis aims to answer the following key questions:

1. What are the national trends that impact on recruitment and retention in the statutory child protection workforce (for example, factors driving change, human service sector competition)?
2. What successful strategies are employed, or will be employed, by state and territory governments to:
  - a. recruit (for example, partnerships with education providers and other key peak bodies, variation in entry level requirements for attracting Indigenous practitioners); and
  - b. retain and support the statutory child protection (CP) workforce (for example, approaches to providing core training, articulated career pathways, work, professional development to reflect changing family demographics, such as recent arrivals, and successful models of professional supervision)?

## National Statutory Child Protection Workforce Analysis

3. What priorities at jurisdictional and national levels could be considered to further develop the capacity and expertise of the statutory child protection workforce?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Data collection

In order to answer the project questions, the Institute:

- Conducted a desktop review of state and territory child protection workforce initiatives, currently available knowledge, and web-based national reports. This involved reviewing publicly available reports and overviewing relevant literature
- Visited the statutory child protection authorities in each state and territory in April and May, conducting consultations with key stakeholders involved in the recruitment, training and management of the statutory child protection sector. The consultations gathered information from the jurisdictions in order to:
  - a. identify the national trends that impact on recruitment and retention in the statutory child protection workforce;
  - b. document and analyse state and territory government statutory child protection workforce initiatives and known outcomes; and
  - c. identify possible strategies that could be driven at jurisdictional and national levels
- Reported preliminary findings to, and participated in, a workshop discussion with FaHCSIA and state and territory representatives on 24 May 2012, in order to assist with prioritisation of work for consideration as part of the action plan of the National Framework from 2012 to 2020.

Consultations with states and territories were organised by a contact person in each jurisdiction and varied in format, depending on the availability of relevant people. Usually, a combination of individual and group discussions occurred over a half to full day visit<sup>1</sup>. The visits were supplemented with follow-up telephone discussions as needed. Consultations were recorded by means of note taking and recording, with the permission of the participants, to aid accuracy.

Prior to the consultations, a small survey was sent to jurisdictions to gain a basic numerical picture of their workforces<sup>2</sup>. Acknowledging that different jurisdictions have

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<sup>1</sup> A discussion guide which was used flexibly to structure the consultations is found at Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> The survey is found at Appendix B.

different data collection methods and trying to minimise the burden on states and territories, we advised them that we would be content with whatever relevant data they could provide.

### **3.2 Analysis**

The consultations were analysed thematically against the consultation questions (see discussion guide Appendix A). The aim of the analysis was to use the experience and knowledge of each jurisdiction to provide a national picture of workforce trends, drivers, recruitment and retention initiatives, and outcomes. The focus was on developing a broad view of national trends rather than a detailed profile of individual states and territories.

### **3.3 Structure of this report**

This report begins with a brief overview of statutory child protection workforce issues, focusing on the Australian context. It includes the key themes related to workforce challenges drawn from the many reviews and inquiries into child protection in Australia over the past 15 years: government reports and Australian academic literature. Where relevant, references to overseas literature, particularly from the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Canada, are included because of the similarities to child protection approaches in Australia. The report then provides the findings of the consultations, incorporating the key common workforce challenges experienced by state and territory statutory child protection authorities and the strategies utilised to meet these challenges. Finally, some possible future directions identified through these consultations and the workshop discussion held on 24 May 2012 are canvassed.

#### **4. Workforce issues in statutory child protection—a brief review**

In Australia, statutory child protection has a relatively small workforce. Martin and Healy (Martin & Healy, 2010) included both government and non-government workers in their study of the child protection workforce in Australia. They estimated that, in 2009, the government and non-government child protection workforce amounted to the equivalent of 10,000 full-time workers. Of these, approximately 69% of full-time equivalents were government workers. (Although it is not specified in the report, a significant number of these would be statutory child protection workers).

The child protection system, as an open system, is affected by many factors, including external factors (Wulczyn, Daro, Fluke, Feldman, Glodek, & Lifanda, 2010). In Australia's case, as in both Canada and the USA, there is added complexity arising from the federated system of government which makes child protection a state and territory based statutory responsibility within a national context. The National Framework (Council of Australian Governments, 2009) has led to a renewed recognition that all levels of government, the non-government sector and all citizens are partners in protecting children. The importance of universal, secondary and tertiary services in providing for the needs of children and families has been emphasised, bringing a range of occupations and professionals into the child protection system. In this brief overview, as in the overall project, we focus on the statutory child protection workforce whilst acknowledging that the role of statutory child protection continues to be affected by many factors that impact on the child protection system as a whole.

Australia has seen many inquiries into child protection systems in its state and territory jurisdictions over the past 15 years. Lonne, Harries and Lantz (2012) refer to 32 inquiries into the care and protection of children in Australia since 1997. The recent Parliamentary Inquiry in Tasmania identified 12 reviews in Tasmania since 2005 (Select Committee on Child Protection, 2011). Often prompted by a child death or family tragedy, most reviews have identified the need for more staff, the need for more experienced staff, the need to retain staff more effectively, and the need to pay attention to attracting, developing and retaining Indigenous staff and other culturally diverse staff.

Problems with recruiting and retaining staff in statutory child protection roles have been well reported both in Australia and across many post-industrial societies (Burns, 2011; Healy, Meagher, & Cullin, 2009; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Tham, 2006). While inquiries over the past 15 years have identified this as a problem in many jurisdictions, precise turnover figures have been traditionally hard to obtain, though some inquiries have yielded estimates. The Victorian *Inquiry into Protecting Victoria's*

*Vulnerable Children* found that the annual turnover in that state was 25% (Cummins, Scott, & Scales, 2012). The recent Northern Territory Board of Inquiry found that annual statutory child protection staff turnover rates were recorded as being as high as 80% in some offices (Northern Territory Government, 2010, p. 476). In the USA, it was estimated that the annual turnover rate for child protection workers (child welfare workers) was over 30% (Mor Barak, et al., 2006).

Data which would enable turnover comparisons between statutory child protection workers and workers in other occupations are difficult to find (Healy, et al., 2009). Martin and Healy's study (2010), which included both statutory (government) and non-statutory (non-government) child protection workers, estimated that the turnover rates in child protection, juvenile justice, general community services and disability were all quite similar at about 25%, indicating a substantial recruitment load for employers in all those industries (Martin & Healy, 2010). There is some broader evidence from the United Kingdom that the average working life for social workers (at eight years) is considerably lower than that for nurses (15 years), doctors (25 years) and pharmacists (28 years) (Curtis, Moriarty, & Netten, 2010). There is also some evidence from the United States of America that statutory child protection workers have higher rates of turnover compared to workers in other practice roles like family support and management (American Public Human Services Association, 2005).

Problems with workforce retention are of concern because of the following consequences:

- Children, young people and families do not receive the services they need. Numerous inquiries, both in Australia and overseas, have attributed poor outcomes for children and families to, amongst other factors, staff shortages and high staff turnover (Cummins, et al., 2012; Jacob & Fanning, 2006; Mullighan, 2008; Northern Territory Government, 2010). The Report of the *Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry* noted that the relationship between the child, the child protection workers and families is a vital factor in protecting children and that high staff turnover compromises this safety feature (Cummins, et al., 2012)
- High turnover of child protection practitioners reduces the access to experienced and expert practitioners for both families and inexperienced practitioners (Healy, et al., 2009)
- Frontline practitioners can experience stress from colleagues' leaving and the workload associated with fewer staff (Healy, et al., 2009). Stress associated with front-line work in the human services, particularly in child protection, is well documented (Chiller & Crisp, 2012)

- Child protection agencies incur considerable costs in recruiting, inducting and supporting new staff (Cummins, et al., 2012; Healy, et al., 2009; Martin & Healy, 2010). This is particularly costly when they are recruiting from overseas (Cummins, et al., 2012).

Despite agreement that 'high turnover' is problematic in statutory child protection, there is no agreement in the literature about what level would constitute a reasonable level of turnover. It is recognised that there is a need for some turnover in order for the workforce to be replenished and refreshed (Mor Barak, et al., 2006). However, Martin and Healy (2010) found that, when workers left child protection and juvenile justice, they were more likely to leave the sector completely, as distinct from those in the general community and disability services, who were more likely to leave to take up another job within their own sector.

Despite these areas of uncertainty, there is an implicit agreement that 25% turnover is too high, negatively affecting services provided to families and children and leading to high recruitment costs in organisations (Cummins, et al., 2012; Martin & Healy, 2010).

### **4.1 Reasons for child protection workforce issues in Australia**

#### ***4.1.1 Demand***

Changes in demand for child protection services are clearly an important factor in workforce planning in child protection. However, predicting demand is a complex undertaking in an open system such as child protection (Laking, 2008). Demand is affected by both internal and external factors, including: the publicity generated by inquiries and reviews; changes in policy and legislation, such as the introduction of mandatory reporting in many states and territories; the widening or narrowing of legislative definitions of child abuse; and changes to service delivery to increase the role of non-government agencies.

The volume of children involved with the statutory protection system has increased over the past fifteen years. Increasing numbers of children are in out-of-home care, and the number of children on care and protection orders continues to rise in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). Notifications rose dramatically between 2001–2002 and 2006–2007, to 309,517 notifications. While from 2006–2007 until 2010–2011 there has been a gradual national decrease in



notifications (163,767)<sup>3</sup> and substantiations (31,527) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012), over half the notifications in 2010–2011 were subsequently investigated, and between 30% and 40% of investigations were substantiated. Indigenous children are vastly overrepresented.

In Australia, as a result of a range of factors including the impact of reviews, there has been rapid growth in child protection practitioners' workloads. Organisations have increased in size, have increased budgets and have attempted to increase their workforces (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2006). Many commentators argue that, despite the ever-increasing resources being provided to statutory child protection services, systems remain overloaded because of increased demand, both from notifications and from expectations that the needs of children and their families require more effective assistance (Lonne, et al., 2012; Scott, 2006b; Wood, 2008).

#### ***4.1.2 The impact of the media***

The media has played a key role in influencing the debate about child maltreatment. This has had a positive impact, in highlighting the issue of child maltreatment, and a negative impact, in its often sensationalist and simplistic reporting about what are long-term and complex issues (Mendes, 2000). The media profiling of child maltreatment has two main workforce effects. The first is the increased demand for services that results from the enhanced profile of child protection issues in the community. The Victorian Inquiry plotted the increases in notifications which followed Victoria's many inquiries and reviews (Cummins, et al., 2012) to provide evidence for this effect. The second way the media affects the child protection workforce is through the responses to the often sensationalist media reporting, that frequently focuses on blaming individual workers or highlights 'systems in crisis' (Canberra Times, May 26, 2012, p. 1). This can leave child protection workers feeling 'besieged and demoralised' (Clark, 1988, p.5 cited in Mendes, 2000, p.54), lower staff morale and consequently have an impact on staff retention (Ford, 2007; Select Committee on Child Protection, 2011).

#### ***4.1.3 Organisational issues***

A number of workplace issues have been identified as contributing to problems with staff turnover and recruitment.

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<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that the number and pattern of notifications vary considerably across jurisdictions.

### *4.1.3.1 Job stress and lack of supervision*

It is well known that statutory child protection is a stressful occupation. It is also known from the literature, and supported in various inquiries, that adequate professional supervision makes a difference to the way that workers are able to manage stress and develop professionally as effective practitioners (Gibbs, 2001; Wyles, 2007). Numerous reviews have found that adequate supervision is not available to assist with the inherent stresses of the job or to build expertise (Ford, 2007; Northern Territory Government, 2010; Select Committee on Child Protection, 2011; Vardon C, 2004). Literature highlights that workers experience critical incidents and violence, and they need support in these and other stressful situations (Lonne, et al., 2012; Stanley & Goddard, 2002).

### *4.1.3.2 Workloads*

The allocation of jobs and management of workloads is another element that impacts on workforce issues. The size of caseload recommendations varies across jurisdictions and inquiries. It is agreed that caseloads need to be manageable for a particular worker in the particular work context, and that, often, they are not manageable (Ford, 2007; Northern Territory Government, 2010; Select Committee on Child Protection, 2011). Martin and Healy noted that overwork is an issue amongst full-time workers in child protection and juvenile justice and can lead to reduced satisfaction and morale (Martin & Healy, 2010).

### *4.1.3.3 Workplace culture*

Workplace culture is regarded as an important element in retaining workers. However, there has been much commentary from inquiries and academic sources that points to problems with statutory child protection organisational culture. Some reviews have identified a culture of blame within child protection systems which adds to workplace stress (Ford, 2007; Select Committee on Child Protection, 2011). This is exacerbated by a sense that every move is potentially in the public eye, leading to a risk-averse culture which can dominate practice. A 2012 review in the Australian Capital Territory described the child protection service as one that has 'a reactive culture that mirrors the chaotic and complex nature of the families they work with' (Phillips, 2012, p.18).

In an Australian study carried out with beginning child protection workers, Gibbs (2009) found a workforce culture that was 'dominated and shaped by policies and procedures' that reinforced compliance rather than critical reflection, and where more time was spent entering data and filling in forms than working with families (Gibbs, 2009, p 296). The discussion of culture is relevant to the brief discussion below about job design.

#### *4.1.3.4 Job design*

Careful design of the job to be done is fundamental to achieving effective recruitment and retention (Northern Territory Government, 2010). The nature of the role is determined by the legislative and policy environment of the particular jurisdiction and the practice framework (explicit or not) which, in turn, flows from the legislative and policy environment. Clarity of the role is important in creating an environment which is supportive for workers and effective for undertaking the job required.

There is discussion in Australia and internationally (see Munro, 2011) about the nature of the role of statutory child protection practitioners and, consequently, the job that is required and the knowledge and skills necessary to do it. Academic commentators argue that the current role of child protection is primarily conceptualised as forensic, investigative and focused on risk assessment. Furthermore, some writers argue that the current state of child protection work in Australia and other westernised countries is based on risk aversion and the development of policies to avoid risk and liability at the expense of professional judgement and relationships with families (Gillingham, 2006; Lonne, et al., 2012; Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2009). Lonne et al. (2012) argue that this narrow role does not address the needs of children and families; rather, it aims to identify, screen and investigate those families 'at risk'.

However, Bromfield and Holzer (2008), in their overview of child protection in Australia, noted that most jurisdictions in Australia were increasingly focused on attending both to risk and to the needs of children and families. This is consistent with the 'child-centred', 'family led and culturally responsive', and 'strengths and evidence based' principles which are emphasised in a number of jurisdictions' practice frameworks<sup>4</sup> (Connolly, 2007). Were the role to be defined more narrowly, a different knowledge base and skills would be required. With the increasing trend towards the non-government agencies' being charged with the preventative and ongoing therapeutic work with families (Martin & Healy, 2010), the need for clarification of the role of the statutory worker is raised afresh.

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<sup>4</sup> For example: See Queensland <http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety/child-safety-practice-manual/practice-framework-and-maps/integrating-and-understanding-the-practice-framework>

For example: see Western Australia

<http://www.dcp.wa.gov.au/Resources/Documents/Policies%20and%20Frameworks/Sig nsOfSafetyFramework2011.pdf>

Within the academic literature, it must be noted that most of the discussion supports the conceptualisation of child protection work (both in its statutory and non-statutory forms) as requiring workers who can deal with complex needs and changing family and cultural circumstances. There is little academic support for the narrower, forensic definition of statutory child protection practice. Much research has indicated that working with families and children is what attracts child protection workers to the job (Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, 2005; Lonne, et al., 2012). The Munro review (2011) in the United Kingdom found that workers were not doing the work they both wanted and needed to do with families because of the proportion of time they spent in front of computers completing accountability requirements.

### **4.1.4 Supply of workers**

Supply of qualified staff has presented an ongoing challenge in child protection in Australia. Most Australian jurisdictions have found that there are not enough social work, psychology and human service graduates available or willing to work in child protection to meet the demand (Health and Community Services Workforce Council, 2011). Acceptable qualifications have been expanded outside these disciplines to deal with the demand in a number of jurisdictions (Health and Community Services Workforce Council, 2011), and some jurisdictions, over many years, have sought to supplement the supply of workers through overseas recruitment (Zubrzycki, Thomson, & Trevithick, 2008).

Over the years, there has been criticism in Australia to the effect that Schools of Social Work have not adequately equipped students to work in statutory child protection work (Vardon, 2004), and there have been calls within social work to address this and provide some specialisation in statutory child protection work (Healy & Meagher, 2007). Although most child protection workers surveyed in the Martin and Healy study indicated that they had the skills needed to do the job, there was a marked discrepancy between their views and those of their managers on this topic. Managers were less confident that the workers had the skills to undertake the work (Martin & Healy, 2010).

## **4.2 Workforce planning**

Workforce planning is a management strategy that provides a framework for 'getting the right number of people with the right competencies in the right jobs at the right time' and is a 'process in which an organisation attempts to estimate the demand for labour and evaluate the size, nature and sources of supply which will be required to meet that demand' (Reilly, 1996, cited in Sinclair & Robinson, 2003, p.5). Workforce planning ideally contributes to a continuous process for shaping the workforce and is a

crucial element in planning how to get from where things stand now to where they need to be in the future.

In child protection in Australia, targeted workforce planning strategies have recently emerged which have been jurisdiction based, reflecting the state and territory responsibility for child protection. Increasingly jurisdictions are collecting data about their workforces. At a national level, there is a gradually increasing knowledge base about the workforce planning issues in child protection through the work of CDSMAC.

*Who Works in Community Services? A profile of Australian workforces in child protection, juvenile justice, disability services and general community services* (Martin & Healy, 2010) is a report commissioned by CDSMAC. It presents a 2009 profile of the Australian workforce in those four sectors of the community services industry. It covers a range of workers in both government and non-government child protection positions and establishes a replicable methodology to collect information on the factors that are currently impacting upon attraction and retention of the community services workforce.

National comparison work has also been undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, commissioned by CDSMAC in 2005. A national comparison of statutory child protection training was undertaken in 2005–2006 to support the work of the Australasian Statutory Child Protection Learning Forum (Bromfield & Ryan, 2007). In response to contextual issues and inquiries, considerable change has occurred across the jurisdictions since those projects were undertaken.

### **4.3 What works in recruiting and retaining workers**

In most jurisdictions, the emphasis in public and policy documents is on recruiting and retaining workers who have the qualities and qualifications to do quality work with children and families in order to promote the safety and wellbeing of children (for example, see Victoria's recent policy, *Protecting children, changing lives: Supporting the child protection workforce* (Department of Human Services, 2011). Interestingly, while there are key themes which emerge from the literature about what works in building an effective workforce in child protection, a systematic review from the USA found that there are few retention strategies which have been systematically evaluated in order to build an evidence base about what works (Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, 2005). That review identified that there was a great need for evaluations of this type.

The strongest messages from the literature on the subject of retention in statutory child protection are that some particular factors are important in promoting retention

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(Gibbs, 2001; Healy, et al., 2009; Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, 2005; Lonne, et al., 2012; Martin & Healy, 2010):

- Reasonable workloads, pay and working conditions
- Clarity of role
- Positive and supportive work culture where workers know they are valued
- Professional supervision which is supportive and encourages professional development and resilience
- Career pathways which enable choice and advancement, including the choice to stay in direct practice
- Opportunities for systematic professional development.

The USA review, referenced earlier, noted that there is no single answer to meeting the recruitment and retention needs of child protection agencies. They summarised:

It is a combination of personal factors that current and prospective staff bring to their job that will result in improved retention – professional commitment, relevant education, previous experience, maturity to address the complex needs of the children and families served by the system – coupled with an organisational environment that values and supports these staff. (Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, 2005, p. 5)

## 5. Results of survey and consultations

### 5.1 Workforce profile

The Institute conducted a survey of the statutory child protection workforce in Australia to provide a basic numerical profile. The blank survey is found at Appendix B. Information on workforce statistics was requested from each of the Australian states and territories. Five of the eight jurisdictions were able to return usable data. Data were provided in differing formats, and thus some information was missing or limited. These data should not be considered to present a profile of the Australian statutory child protection workforce; however, they provide some useful information on trends in the workforce, and findings consistent with previous studies are noted.

**Table 1: Statutory child protection workforce at 30 June 2011**

Jurisdiction	Employees in Child Protection Workforce (Number)	Female %	Aged <35 %	Left 2010– 2011 Financial Year %	Experience <1 year %	Workforce growth since 2006 %*
WA	883	86	39	9	17	70
Qld	1,689	89	50	22	18	28
Vic	1,232 (FTE)	88	44	12 <sup>5</sup>	20	26 <sup>6</sup>
NSW	3,576	84	36	8	13	48
ACT	81.15 (FTE)	85	25	-	6	-23

\*These data refer to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2011, and workforces in some jurisdictions have changed markedly since then.

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<sup>5</sup> Approximation based on number of employees leaving as a proportion of current full-time equivalent (FTE) employees.

<sup>6</sup> Based on data provided in (Cummins, et al., 2012).

The demographic profile of data provided was consistent with previous findings on the gender, age and experience level of statutory child protection workers. The majority of workers are female, constituting 84–89% of the workforce. This is consistent with the findings from a recent review of the Victorian child protection workforce, in which 88% of workers were female (Cummins, et al., 2012). This is slightly higher than the 79% female workers found by (Martin & Healy, 2010) for combined statutory and non-government child protection workers. The workforce is generally young, with 25–50% under the age of 35; this is again consistent with the findings in Victoria (Cummins, et al., 2012). The proportion with less than 1 year's experience depended on the jurisdiction, with a range of 6% to 20%. A significant proportion, ranging from 27% to 69%, also had more than 5 years' experience in child protection.

Turnover for the 2010–2011 financial year varied from 8% to 22%. All the jurisdictions except the Australian Capital Territory had more employees in June 2011 than in June 2006, with growth of up to 70%. How this relates to full-time equivalent positions (FTE) in this sample is not known, except in the case of Victoria. Victoria had a 26% increase in their FTE child protection workforce from June 2006 to June 2011 (Cummins, et al., 2012).

The Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia provided data on the qualifications of their child protection workforce in June 2011. In both these jurisdictions, close to 80% of child protection workers had a degree qualification, half of which were social work degrees. Other degree-level qualifications included psychology (12–19%), social science (6–12%) and other (20–30%). Diploma and Certificate qualifications were held by 2–19% of the workforce. A broad and summarised overview of the qualifications of the other workforces was obtained through the consultations and publicly available documentation and is outlined in the table below.



**Table 2: Basic qualifications required for child protection worker April 2012**

<b>Jurisdiction</b>	<b>Qualifications required</b>	<b>Profile if available in April/May 2012</b>
<b>ACT</b>	Degree qualification	Currently, approximately 90% have social work degrees
<b>WA</b>	Specified calling qualifications framework which relates to child protection work. Degree level required.	See paragraph above for information at June 2011
<b>NSW</b>	Degree for people who do not identify as Indigenous. Degrees classified according to University and title as preferred or related.	
<b>QLD</b>	Degree for Child Safety Officer can include education nursing, policing and law, criminal justice, social sciences, social work, applied social sciences, psychology, human services, behavioural science, community welfare	
<b>SA</b>	Social work degree	All social workers
<b>TAS</b>	Degrees and Certificate IV in Community Services	Preferred qualification is social work
<b>Victoria</b>	Preferred (Degree or postgraduate)  Relevant (Degree)  Minimum (Diploma with field education)	
<b>NT</b>	Degree in social work, psychology, welfare work or other as appropriate to the duties to be performed	

One issue that became very clear throughout this project was the mixed ability of jurisdictions to provide data on their workforce in a way that facilitated the development of a national picture and cross- jurisdictional comparisons. We expected that there would be differences between jurisdictions and attempted to make the

survey as flexible as possible to minimise the data burden on the jurisdictions, whilst still providing some useful information. As anticipated, there were differences in the ways jurisdictions collected data on their workforces, including definitions, counting rules and what they counted. For example, some jurisdictions reported numbers of workers, and others reported full-time equivalents. Some jurisdictions recorded the qualifications of their workers; others did not.

It was not clear from our consultations to what extent jurisdictions collected data which would enable linking of qualifications with retention variables. One question requiring an answer for workforce planning is, 'What qualifications are needed to promote quality practice and satisfactory levels of retention?' This question is difficult to answer without collecting workers' qualifications and tracking their career through the organisation.

## **5.2 National trends which impact on recruitment and retention**

### ***5.2.1 Broad structural trends***

Economic conditions affect jurisdictions. These effects are most noticeably context specific. For example, in periods of economic downturn or economic uncertainty, workers may be less inclined to relinquish a secure job in the public service. The mining boom in Western Australia and Queensland has implications across Australia, but particularly for those states. In boom economies, workers may have a wider range of choices available to them.

### ***5.2.2 Context specific issues***

Housing costs impact on workers going to certain places, including the Australian Capital Territory and places affected by the mining boom.

Geographic factors affect practice and workforce availability. For example, remote practice and vast distances create a dramatically different working environment which some people do not wish to experience, reducing the potential supply of suitable workers. Some leave quickly because they do not like the nature of the practice or the isolation, thereby increasing turnover.

### ***5.2.3 Competition with other government departments***

Some jurisdictions identified that the competition with other government departments for professionals willing to work in rural areas was high, for example, New South Wales. In the Australian Capital Territory, the Commonwealth Government is also a competitor. However, this type of competition can vary over time due to

recruitment patterns. It was noted that the Australian Capital Territory is experiencing less competition from New South Wales than previously.

#### ***5.2.4 Demand for services***

The nature of the demand for services in the states and territories formed a backdrop to the consultations. All the above mentioned drivers of workforce issues impact upon the demand for services. Whilst the exact nature and extent of the demand for services are context specific (for example, notifications reduced in 2010–2011 in some states and territories but not others), the demand for services is a national driver for workforce issues. As previously noted, the demand for services has, sometimes dramatically and sometimes steadily, increased in Australia over the past 20 years.

Changes in legislation, including changes to mandatory legislation, policy changes affecting the balance of statutory and preventative work, and the changing roles of the non-government sector in jurisdictions, all contribute to the demand for statutory child protection services. Changes to practice resulting from policy and legislative changes contribute to changing demand requirements. Examples include New South Wales' outsourcing foster care to non-government organisations, changing of reporting thresholds to more serious concerns, introduction of differentiated intake systems and gateways for help through the non-government organisations (for example in Victoria, Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland).

Due to periods of high demand versus supply, most jurisdictions have expanded the entry-level qualifications acceptable, to meet the need.

#### ***5.2.5 The attention of reviews to workforce issues***

As stated above, reviews tend to highlight the need for increased workforce. In addition, they often have the concurrent effect of raising public awareness, thereby increasing demand as a result of increased notifications. This was noted by Queensland, Victoria, Western Australia, Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. The immediate impact of sudden and dramatic increases in staff is often potentially shallow and inexperienced practice, where novice staff are not provided with the opportunity to develop specific child protection skills, knowledge and values, prior to being 'thrown into the deep end'.

#### ***5.2.6 Restructuring of departments***

Restructuring of departments may occur because of either recommendation from reviews or changes in government from the single focus department to a bigger department. For example, in Queensland in 2005 following the Crime and Misconduct Commission's Inquiries, the stand-alone Department of Child Safety was established.

In 2009, this was absorbed into the Department of Communities. Following the Queensland state elections in 2012, Child Safety is now part of the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services. Western Australia moved child protection into a stand-alone department after the last review (2007), as did the Northern Territory as a result of the reform process initiated by the Board of Inquiry in 2010. In contrast, South Australia has created a Department for Education and Child Development which brings together child protection, education and some children's health services. Restructuring into stand-alone or larger departments can have a significant cost. In a larger department, the impact on the ability to focus specifically on the child protection workforce may be lost. Alternatively, as was suggested in consultations, it may provide greater opportunities for workers to move around and gain experience and refreshment from other areas of work, thereby increasing their longevity in the child protection workforce.

### ***5.2.7 Demographics of the workforce***

The general ageing of the population was identified as being reflected in the child protection workforce for many jurisdictions. It was noted that a lot of people are retiring in the near future and that this contributes to succession challenges for middle management. The proportion of women in the workforce who have babies and therefore require maternity and other caring leave was a common feature in the jurisdictions, as were the difficulties in recruiting men to child protection work. The proportion of men studying in disciplines from which child protection services recruit remains low.

### ***5.2.8 Negative press and professional reputation***

Common across the jurisdictions was the experience that multiple reviews involve negative press for the workforce and for child protection work in general. Associated with the multiple reviews, child death inquiries and negative press, statutory child protection practice can appear to be in constant chaos and crisis. This presents a negative image to potential workers and can lead to low morale in workplaces.

Consultations in a number of jurisdictions revealed a view that a significant number of universities providing social work education courses present statutory child protection to their students as 'not really social work'. This leads to graduates not having the skills to undertake statutory work and/or not wanting to enter the statutory child protection workforce.

#### **Summary of national trends**

There were a number of national trends identified which impact upon recruitment and retention: broad structural trends, for example, economic conditions, including downturns and booms; context specific issues, for example, housing costs in mining areas; competition for workers with other government departments; changing and unpredictable demand for child protection services; reviews and inquiries; restructuring of departments; demographics of the workforce; negative press about child protection and child protection practitioners.

## **5.3 Broad and common workforce concerns**

### ***5.3.1 Turnover***

Overall, as will be shown in the sections on recruitment and retention strategies, jurisdictions are demonstrating an increased sophistication in their workforce planning and development processes. Some jurisdictions, for example, Victoria, now have more comprehensive workforce data which enable evaluation of recruitment and retention initiatives. The capacity of the child protection system to do its job is seen as directly linked to workforce planning and development.

Most jurisdictions have put significant effort into recruitment, as is reflected later in the report, responding to the increased demand already discussed. However, issues remain about turnover and the effect this has on the work of child protection, including building a depth of capacity in the workforce. For example, concerns were raised in Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia about premature promotion, which can occur out of necessity in regional and remote areas.

The need to understand why people leave the workforce was commonly identified as an issue. Some jurisdictions conduct exit interviews routinely; but the consultations revealed that, due to the sometimes unpredictable nature of employment separations, this was not always possible. In their exit interviews, New South Wales, for example, found that people often leave for lifestyle reasons or because of conflict with managers. Exit interviews also show that overall, in New South Wales, people feel that they have been well briefed about the job they are commencing.

It seemed that, following considerable investment of all jurisdictions in 'getting staff', the major issue or concern is now how to recruit and retain the 'right' staff. Added to this is the identified need to have the 'right' staff in the 'right' jobs. For some jurisdictions, retention is not a current problem.

### ***5.3.2 Culturally diverse staff, particularly Indigenous staff***

All jurisdictions noted the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and families as clients in the child protection system, regardless of the absolute numbers involved. Recruiting, retaining and developing Indigenous people to undertake child protection work was a major concern in all jurisdictions. It was a particularly pronounced concern in those states and territories with high proportions of Indigenous citizens, such as Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. A number of jurisdictions considered that, whilst the proportions may not yet be sufficient, and may not reflect a particular strategy, they do recruit staff from culturally diverse backgrounds.

### **5.3.3 Appropriate qualifications**

How the role of the statutory child protection practitioner is conceptualised affects many workforce issues, including decisions about appropriate beginning qualifications and the type of core training and supervision which is required, and the overall professional profile of the workforce. Jurisdictions indicated that a key question was whether the statutory child protection practitioner is conceptualised as a holistic practice human service professional or whether the emphasis is on their being forensic and technical investigators. The agreed role is determined both by policy and legislation. A number of jurisdictions had practice frameworks which were holistic in nature, relationship based, child-centred and family-focused.

Our Victorian informants indicated that the decision has been made to follow a professionalisation route. In 2009, Queensland broadened the degree-level qualifications acceptable for entry to the role of Child Safety Officer, with a strong emphasis on a core training pathway. This was largely to meet the demand for workers. There is a flow-on effect from these changes. For example, the fewer the social workers in the workforce, the less capacity there is for the organisation to supervise social work students on placement—a known source of potential recruits.

### **5.3.4 Data issues**

What recruitment and retention data are collected, counting rules, and definitions, vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Forming a clear national picture about who stays and who leaves is, therefore, difficult. There is an increasing trend to ask people why they leave, usually through exit interviews. However, this is only as good as the systems that surround it, in the sense that the process may be there, but operational requirements may interfere with its execution. Some jurisdictions, for example the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and the Northern Territory, are carrying out pulse checks or whole-of-staff surveys about workplace culture and career intentions. Victoria has undertaken extensive staff surveys to try to understand staff perspectives on their work and organisational context. Understanding why people stay is very important, as we really do not have a clear knowledge base around that in the Australian context.

#### **Summary of common workforce concerns**

Jurisdictions were commonly concerned about improving turnover, the need for Indigenous staff and identifying appropriate qualifications for child protection workers. The lack of comparable workforce data across jurisdictions was noticeable.

## **5.4 Successful strategies for recruitment**

### ***5.4.1 The link between recruitment and retention***

It was extensively acknowledged in the consultations that the success of recruitment might partly be measured, particularly after the heat of an inquiry or review, by the achievement of an increase in numbers of workers. However, it is increasingly understood that, if unsuitable staff are recruited, who either do not stay for long or who stay but cannot work effectively, then recruitment is not effective. Where potentially suitable people are recruited but do not stay, the link between recruitment and retention becomes of paramount importance.

### ***5.4.2 Improved recruitment and marketing processes***

Jurisdictions across Australia are enhancing their recruitment processes. Most use a toolkit of strategies to ensure recruitment meets the needs of the organisation. Desirable individual attributes, as well as qualifications, are increasingly articulated and assessed. Rolling recruitment, including continuous advertising, has been introduced in a number of jurisdictions, in place of regular recruitment drives at intervals (for example Western Australia, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory). Active campaign marketing was identified by most jurisdictions, for example at universities' careers events and career expos.

Victoria described a very developed campaign, using direct marketing of child protection as a career to students. Emails are sent directly to students to encourage them to undertake their practice placements in child protection, and there is marketing material to support this. Victoria has a strategy of pursuing students rather than going through lecturers. Marketing, branding and advertising were considered three different aspects of recruitment. They advertise a career rather than a specific position or vacancies and have particularised recruitment to different regions, using social media and obtaining good responses with reduced costs. People are directed to their website with videos marketing a career in child protection.

Some strategies involve streamlining the recruitment process and filtering out obviously unsuitable people early, for example:

- The Australian Capital Territory has reduced the time between advertisement and letter of offer from 60–70 days to 22 days. They have introduced proactive recruitment, which involves actively following up with possible candidates



- Queensland has introduced a centralised recruitment team comprising former child safety front-line staff and Human Resource specialists to ensure that applicants have the basic qualifications and attribute requirements and to provide an overview of what the work involves before the final interview
- A combination of centralised and local recruitment processes were used by jurisdictions, for example, South Australia has found that recruiting locally can be particularly successful where specific needs exist
- More attention is being paid to competency and attributes during the recruitment and selection process, for example:
  - New South Wales has used a locally based Assessment Centre model. Rather than focus on qualifications and skills only, people are invited to go through a more comprehensive assessment process. The assessment centre has been designed to measure eight core competencies and to provide an environment and exercises that reflect the Community Services Centre (CSC) workplace as closely as possible. These competencies include: motivation for a caseworker career, analysis and problem solving, interaction, teamwork, decision making, organisation, adapting and coping and cultural competence. There are five tasks which test the above core competencies. These are: **written exercise** which requires candidates to analyse a situation, develop a strategy and write a clear and organised report; **team task** which requires candidates to communicate clearly, listen well and co-operate with others; **role play** which requires candidates to explore and resolve a client situation by analysing the situation and communicating effectively; **interview** with a Community Services manager and an independent person, focusing on candidates understanding of the position and the experience they bring to the role; and **verbal reasoning test** which is a written multiple choice test measuring analytical skills. This has been found to be particularly appropriate for Indigenous and culturally diverse staff
  - Tasmania is in the process of introducing competency-based recruitment interviewing processes, based on other states and territories and introducing a 6-month probationary period as a time of reflection for the new recruit about whether the job is the right fit
  - Western Australia has developed and implemented a Child Protection Qualifications Framework (CPQF) which has broadened the number of “human service” qualifications that the Department will accept. The framework details the professional knowledge and skills a child protection worker acquires through tertiary studies and is a guide for choosing courses relevant to professional child protection work and for ensuring that only suitably qualified applicants are employed

- Western Australia also operates a Child Protection Workforce Model. The model is designed to ensure the integrity of the Department's professional workforce and, as an attraction and retention strategy linked to the Department's diversity targets, gives preference to Aboriginal people and people from different diversity groups when recruiting for positions that are unable to be filled by suitably qualified applicants.
- Another strategy evident in Queensland in 2009 was to increase the possible pool of applicants by accepting an increased range of qualifications. As can be seen from Table 2 above, most states accept a range of qualifications.

Jurisdictions are at different stages in the development of extensive and varied recruitment strategies. The responses as to whether these strategies were effective in recruiting the right number of right staff were mixed. For example, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria consider that their strategies have been successful in achieving a 'full' workforce. Victorian participants noted that they had never had such a good pool of applicants, which allowed them to be more 'picky' about whom they recruited. It was noted that higher rates of retention, not only recruitment strategies, have made a major contribution to the full workforce in Victoria and that orientating recruitment to regions which have vacancies is important. Other places were less sure about the effectiveness of strategies. Some jurisdictions were still very much in the planning stages for new strategies, or the strategies were too new to be able to provide evidence of outcomes.

### ***5.4.3 Partnerships with education providers***

Another category of recruitment strategies involved partnerships with universities and other educational providers, for example, the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. It was noted across a number of jurisdictions that partnerships with universities had undergone periods when they flourished and periods when little partnership working was happening. This ebb and flow was noted in Queensland, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania. These changes in partnership arrangements were influenced by the particular people involved (perhaps moving on) and changes to the policy and practice context in the particular jurisdiction. For example, prior to the decision to broaden required qualifications in Queensland, seed funding was provided to social work programs to build the child protection curriculum and resources. Western Australia has current partnerships with Higher Education providers, for example, with Edith Cowan University, which offers a human services degree which was thought to be very suitable for child protection work.

Providing placement opportunities to social work students in particular and also to other human service workers is a known recruitment strategy. This strategy has an evidence base. Healy and Meagher's research (Healy & Meagher, 2007) indicates that, if a positive student placement is provided, people are more likely to consider a career in child protection. This evidence was supported by the experience of the jurisdictions. Some examples:

- Western Australia has 40 social work students per year on placement. The Department provides support, including money and housing, for students to go to rural and remote settings
- Victoria aims to prepare students for care and protection work—approx. 200 students per year are accepted on placement. Of these, Victorian statistics indicate that 40% are recruited
- Tasmania is about to introduce a child protection student unit in partnership with the University of Tasmania
- For the past 15 years, New South Wales has had formal relationships with Schools of Social Work throughout NSW. This has been extremely successful (particularly in the mid 1990s and early 2000s, when NSW was for the most part only able to attract new grads and when data were available), though success is more difficult to demonstrate because data are no longer available. The partnership with universities included a Field Education Policy and area field placement agreements, jointly funded teaching appointments, joint supervisor training and opportunities to promote work in the Department. It resulted in increases in social work field placements within the organisation, increased recruitment to the Department following field placements and the influencing of the social work curricula to make them more responsive to statutory social work.

#### ***5.4.4 International recruitment***

A range of jurisdictions use the strategy of overseas recruitment to a greater or lesser extent. The Australian Capital Territory has a high reliance on international recruitment and has had for about ten years. Western Australia has some overseas staff, and the Northern Territory, at the time of our consultations in April 2012, had about 32 international recruits soon to arrive. Victoria has recruited from overseas for many years but indicates a lower reliance on it now. There was a general preference expressed for 'growing our own' child protection workers, but also an acknowledgment that, in crisis situations or periods of high unanticipated demand, this may not be possible.

How effective international recruitment is against retention and quality practice benchmarks is not clear. The Australian Capital Territory has found that it has been helpful and that 40% of international staff recruited in 2004 are still in the Australian Capital Territory. Some experienced workers may be recruited to practise in Australia, which may increase practice depth, given that lack of practice depth has been identified as an issue in the child protection workforce. However, the practice they have experienced in the United Kingdom, for example, may be vastly different from that in the new context. Transferability of practice and cultural differences were identified as issues to be addressed in international recruitment. In particular, some overseas recruits have difficulty in developing an understanding of the history of Indigenous peoples in Australia, relationships between Indigenous peoples and later settlers and child protection practice in that context.

Overseas recruitment was regarded as expensive. This was due to recruitment processes, relocation assistance and the support needed for practitioners to be able to bridge the cultural differences in practice and life in a new environment. There is a small amount of literature looking at this issue of international recruitment in child protection, which highlights the complexity of cross-national practice (Zubrzycki, et al., 2008).

#### ***5.4.5 Key issues in recruitment across the jurisdictions***

In summary, jurisdictions utilised a range of strategies as outlined above. Some key issues were identified across the states and territories:

- If social work is regarded as the preferred qualification (and this is not agreed), then there are not enough social workers being produced every year—or not enough who are considering child protection as a career. This is a supply issue. For example, generally, the experience was that jurisdictions were not able to recruit the number of social workers which they could employ if they were available.

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- All jurisdictions identified big challenges in recruitment for practice in regional and remote areas
- There are difficulties across the nation in recruiting Indigenous staff. For example, in South Australia and Queensland, the degree-level qualification requirement can, in effect, shut out Indigenous staff for statutory child protection positions.

### **Summary of recruitment strategies and issues**

Currently, jurisdictions are employing the following strategies: improved, streamlined recruitment and marketing processes; partnerships with education providers; and international recruitment. Increasingly, it is understood that, if unsuitable staff are recruited, who either do not stay for long or who stay but cannot work effectively, then recruitment is not effective. Where potentially suitable people are recruited but do not stay, the link between recruitment and retention becomes of paramount importance.

There are not enough social workers graduating each year who are considering child protection as a career. Recruitment in regional and remote areas is a major challenge. Difficulties in recruiting Indigenous staff occur across the nation and degree requirements can shut out Indigenous workers.

## 5.5 Retention

There was awareness expressed in the consultations that retaining the 'right' people in the job is key to providing quality service. There was recognition that whilst jurisdictions may invest considerable time and money in recruiting, as described in section 5.4, the workers' experiences of their workplaces, including culture, systems and workload, make a difference to retention rates.

At the time of the consultations, there were varying degrees of concern about levels of retention. As can be seen from the data provided by jurisdictions in Table 1, the rates of separations at 30 June 2010–2011 varied from 8% to 22%. During our consultations, South Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania indicated that they do not have a problem with turnover rates. Queensland has experienced an improvement. The Northern Territory is very concerned about their retention rates—they have very small numbers, so any one person leaving is a bigger issue than in larger states. Victoria's exit and retention surveys show that while the 'right' people may be recruited, they will still leave if the work place does not meet their expectations. There was recognition from some jurisdictions that there is not a lot offered that specifically addresses retention.

Four main categories of retention strategies were evident from the consultations with the jurisdictions: incentives, professional development, building a supportive environment, and job redesign including provision of opportunities for career pathways.

### 5.5.1 Incentives

Incentives for child protection workers included:

- Special payments for moving to regional and remote areas: for example, housing subsidies in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland
- Broad employment practices: for example, flexible working arrangements and Enterprise Agreements as in the Australian Capital Territory, which included study bank
- Retention allowances: for example, payment for staying longer than 2 years
- Payments of university courses and HECS fees, evident in a number of jurisdictions either in the present or the past
- Good pay rates: Where pay rates are comparatively favourable, it is considered that this contributes to improved levels of retention. In Western Australia, child protection staff that possess the relevant qualifications (that is, they meet the Child Protection Qualifications Framework) are paid a Specified Calling salary,

which is higher than normal State Government Award rates. This is in recognition of individuals who have a qualification related to child protection.

It is not clear how effective most of these strategies are in promoting retention, but there is some evidence from the literature that good relative pay rates are effective (Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, 2005).

### ***5.5.2 Professional development***

Providing the most appropriate professional development opportunities was generally seen as necessary for enabling the organisation to do its job and as important for retaining staff. Professional development was seen as needed to build the expert practitioner, and ranged from core training for new recruits to ongoing professional development. There was a range of ways of approaching this.

#### ***5.5.2.1 Building the expert practitioner—core training***

Most jurisdictions accept that new graduates, including social workers, are not 'role ready'. New recruits may also not necessarily be new graduates and it is understood that they too are unlikely to be entirely role ready due to the specific requirements of the child protection role. All take responsibility for developing the knowledge, skills and values in-house. There is an awareness across the jurisdictions that an assessment of an individual's needs is required before they start work, and then, ideally, a program tailored to the individual could be completed. There is variation in the extent to which this is achieved.

The type of core training, or training for new recruits, varied in definition, type, method of delivery and length across the country. The core training, if defined as what is required prior to the new recruit's being placed in a work situation, varied in length from two weeks in Western Australia to 16 weeks in New South Wales.

A number of jurisdictions are currently reviewing or renewing their professional learning units. For example:

- The Northern Territory is rethinking the learning landscape with a different method to the traditional 'training' approach, which would include scaffolded learning, more pathways for staff, learning needs following the learner
- Western Australia also has significant plans for their delivery of learning to introduce a blended learning approach which would include e-learning, online, virtual learning, face-to-face, work based learning and competency approaches.

Jurisdictions have a range of methods to 'up skill' the beginning child protection practitioner. Most models in the jurisdictions include a combination of methods. These include the completion of required modules or units of work:

- Victoria provides core training to all new entry level child protection workers, which includes three mandatory courses: beginning practice; the prevention and management of occupational violence; and attachment development and trauma. This includes four days dedicated to court processes.

Variations on field coaching models are also developing:

- New South Wales has developed a field coaching model. Field Coaches go into the field to support new workers and managers. As soon as a person is recruited, the coach makes contact with the worker and their manager, gives them a login to the learner-management system and sets up the first meeting. This provides a vehicle for sharing many new policies and procedures. There is a lot of self-directed learning in this model. Apart from professional learning in recognition of their beginning status, new staff in NSW work as secondary workers for the first 16 weeks then graduate to primary workers
- Tasmania is introducing an integrated mentoring and coursework model, *Child Protection Recruitment Induction and On Boarding Program*, which provides active support to the new worker in their workplace for a concentrated period of six months and includes completion of required units and emphasis on professional development plans for three years following recruitment.
- There are Senior Practice Development Officer (SPDO) positions in all district offices across Western Australia. SPDOs are responsible for providing advice, consultation and assistance to staff on policy and practice matters including complex cases, as well as promoting quality practice and continuous improvement through various learning strategies including mentoring and coaching. In addition, to support the implementation of the Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework, there are practice leaders in districts to support and enable ongoing group learning on Signs of Safety practices.

Another model is the articulation of the core learning with an Australian Qualifications Framework qualification.

- For approximately three years, Queensland has conducted a 72-week work based program, comprising five phases, including withdrawal periods to attend face-to-face educational experiences. Departmental trainers attend workplaces regularly to assist the workers and their managers with the completion of the workplace requirements. Delivered by the Department, this professional



learning is linked with two vocational graduate certificates awarded through a partnership with Sunshine Coast Institute of Tertiary and Further Education. This was introduced as a retention strategy but is currently under review due to low completion rates.

### *5.5.2.2 Building the expert practitioner—ongoing professional development*

Once again, there was considerable range in the type of ongoing professional development provided, how systematically it was developed, and the extent to which it is integrated with training for new recruits. In some jurisdictions, for example, Tasmania, an integrated system of moving people from novice to expert is developing, which integrates ongoing professional learning with core training. Tasmania's new *Recruitment, Induction and On Boarding Program* covers 36 months of professional development, with a concentration on mentoring and support in the first six months. Western Australia has an explicit People Development Framework which includes initiatives such as supporting staff without formal qualifications to complete the Diploma of Child, Youth and Family Intervention.

Other jurisdictions noted that attention had been focused on the core training of new recruits and that this had sometimes left the professional development of more experienced staff to be undertaken on an *ad hoc* basis. It also meant that there could be a knowledge and skills gap amongst the middle management. Some jurisdictions provide, or have provided, postgraduate education opportunities, for example, Queensland, Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria.

- Victoria provides a range of professional development opportunities for staff, offering Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma courses with the aim of enhancing the quality of practice and developing the professionalism of the workforce. These have proved popular with staff.
- Western Australia fully funds 15 staff per year to complete a postgraduate certificate, and again, this was a popular course, with 42 applications for 15 places in 2012.

Leadership development was identified by jurisdictions as an important area which had received greater or lesser attention and resources. The development of team leaders and other management staff was regarded almost universally as key to supporting the front-line child protection workers and to creating a positive workplace culture.

- Victoria provides a leadership development and coaching program (10 hours of coaching) for child protection worker levels 4 and 5 (CPW4 & 5) staff (approximately 300 staff). The program is halfway through its initial iteration

and is about to be evaluated. Victoria has a Leading Practice resource guide which recognises that front-line and middle managers play a crucial role in retaining staff and that support of the staff in these leadership and management positions is vital to ensuring their ongoing professional development and capacity building.

Other professional development opportunities identified included learning networks established in Western Australia:

- Development of learning networks: people across the department who work more than 10% in learning and development were invited to be part of a learning network, which includes mentoring, training and coaching. This was initially trialled in the Pilbara Region and is being implemented statewide.

### ***5.5.3 Job redesign and career pathways***

#### *5.5.3.1 Job design and workload*

Jurisdictions were aware of the importance of workload and job design in retaining and supporting staff.

Workload management is a complicated matter in child protection, and some jurisdictions were proactive in trying to give managers and workers the tools to manage workload effectively.

- For example, in Queensland, a new workload management strategy has been introduced, the *Workload Management Guide for Child Safety Service Centres*, following a pilot which was well received in the piloted sites
- Western Australia introduced its workload management strategy in 2008 in accordance to the WA Industrial Commission Order.

This was also related to the design of the job. Job design strategies have included the development of support positions. This involves rethinking the job to include non-qualified staff for support roles, as exists currently in Queensland (the Child Safety Support Officers) and Victoria (child protection officer level 1-CPW1 classification). Depending on the jurisdiction, support staff carry out roles such as transport and arranging meetings. The Australian Capital Territory is also considering the development of such a role in their workforce.

#### *5.5.3.2 Career pathways*

The literature indicates the importance of providing options for career progression for practitioners. Career path development is occurring in several jurisdictions to give greater career options for direct practitioners. This strategy aims to retain practitioners in practitioner positions; some jurisdictions have experienced losing direct practitioners to policy and program work via administrative positions. This process also builds in access to expertise for novice practitioners. Some examples follow:

- In Queensland, ‘accelerated progression’ for Child Safety Officers from Professional Officer 2 (PO2) to Professional Officer 3 (PO3) has been introduced. Workers can stay at the front line and can go up a wage level, which gives continuity. Workers do not have to apply for PO3, but can demonstrate the required competencies instead. In Queensland, it is thought that this has retained people who otherwise may have left
- Victoria has a new operating model which includes a new practice stream that keeps practitioners on the ground by offering them a career path with a caseload. The proposed practice stream comprises child protection

practitioners, child protection advanced practitioners, senior child protection practitioners, practice leaders and principal practitioners, with all practice positions including a direct case-carrying component

- Establishment of specialist positions in several states is seen as offering further opportunities for career progression. Examples in Queensland include the SCAN—Suspected child abuse and neglect team coordinator; the family group coordinator; and court practitioners. In Western Australia, there is the Senior Practitioner position.

The use of planning systems to progress careers was noted:

- In South Australia, Performance Partnership Plans (PPPs) were introduced, separated from supervision. This involved a formalised annual process which could be carried out on a needs basis. It aims to cover issues relevant to career progression and retention. Western Australia has a similar set of processes.

Other career progression-related retention strategies included the provision of opportunities for change from front-line practice in order to retain people in practice in the longer term. For example, where child protection is or has been undertaken in a larger department, the wider department can offer a variation in roles when needed, thus increasing the sustainability of the workforce.

### ***5.5.4 Building a positive and supportive workplace culture***

Many reviews and the literature recognise the importance of professional development, incentives and working conditions, job design and career structure in building a positive workplace culture and influencing the relationship of workplace culture to retention rates. However, other critical elements of the positive workplace culture are supportive professional supervision and effective middle management. Victoria has found that the relationships with the immediate supervisors and the actions of the supervisors were influential in workers' decisions to leave.

#### ***5.5.4.1 Supervision and the importance of building middle management***

It is agreed across most jurisdictions that two critical elements of retention are supportive professional supervision and effective middle management or team leadership. These are linked: in order to provide supervision, middle management has to support this and supervision skills are needed. As already noted, there was a sense expressed in some jurisdictions that significant resources have gone into the front end, including recruitment and core training, leaving less available for building strength and expertise in the middle management/team leader level.

Most jurisdictions were fully aware of the importance of supervision in supporting and developing staff, and it often underpinned child protection practice frameworks (for example, Queensland, Tasmania). Most jurisdictions have policies embracing supervision. A number of jurisdictions had recently revisited their supervision practice or were in the process of revitalising this important set of processes. For example:

- The Australian Capital Territory has recently redeveloped their supervision framework and invested strongly in training for both supervisors and those being supervised
- Supervision is linked to a Learning Management System in Western Australia in order to track supervision activity.

Nonetheless, a number of jurisdictions were not convinced that supervision is as embedded as it needed to be; and when things get busy, as they inevitably do in child protection agencies, supervision slips away. Furthermore, there was some concern that, even when supervision for front-line workers is well covered, people above team leader level may not be receiving needed supervision.

Professional supervision, as distinct from supervision purely for task and accountability purposes, requires:

- Time: it was noted that it is difficult to get beyond the cases to the professional, supportive and reflective supervision if the team leader is supervising six or seven workers with 20 cases each
- Capacity of supervisors, including the understanding of a professional supervision framework: it was noted in some jurisdictions that social work and psychology have such a framework, but supervision training is needed to bridge the gap where there are not enough people with those professional backgrounds.

### *5.5.4.2 Shared and supported decision making*

There is increasing recognition of the importance of a culture of shared decision making to promote a mutually supportive environment.

- Western Australia has an explicitly stated culture of decision making that is guided by the Signs of Safety core principles and disciplines<sup>7</sup>. One of the mechanisms to support staff to work in the contested and anxious environment of child protection work is through the use of appreciative inquiry processes which are designed to build practice depth and confidence among practitioners to deliver safer outcomes for vulnerable children
- A new trial in Bathurst and Mudgee in regional New South Wales is using a new model of casework, in which the case work manager becomes a consultant with a team of four or five others working on each case; this model invests heavily in group supervision.

### ***5.5.5 Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse recruitment and retention strategies***

Building a workforce which reflects the diversity of people they need to work with is a challenge for jurisdictions. Jurisdictions that have larger Indigenous populations feel that they have had some success with attracting Indigenous workers, and some have Indigenous workforce plans—for example, Western Australia. Some workforce plans are related to the wider workforce of the state's public service (for example, in Queensland). In NSW, the percentage of Indigenous staff has increased from 2% in 2002 to around 12% in 2012.

- Western Australia's Department for Child Protection has its own Aboriginal Employment and Learning Strategy (2009–2014) and an *Aboriginal Attraction and Retention Toolkit*. They have a target of 20% employees and currently sit at 10.2%. Western Australia has a number of specific strategies for attracting and recruiting Indigenous staff, including :
  - A specific employment program for Indigenous staff
  - A toolkit to assist the regions in recruitment
  - Traineeships and internships—currently, there are three to seven students supported to study social work, and they have options for temporary work in holidays. Western Australia has found that, if they are well supported, they are more likely to continue in the Department

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<http://www.dcp.wa.gov.au/Resources/Documents/Policies%20and%20Frameworks/SignsOfSafetyFramework2011.pdf> (page 4-5; page 17)

## National Statutory Child Protection Workforce Analysis

- A national marketing campaign for Indigenous staff for specific positions
  - Successful involvement of elders in local Aboriginal Community Council in recruitment. This is a proactive strategy based on partnerships.
- New South Wales has had success with targeted advertising as well as Public Information Sessions in some of the more remote locations. The recruitment process requires minimal effort for the candidate in terms of written applications, with the emphasis being more on eligibility and experience at the written application stage. The assessment centre methodology then provides an opportunity for eligible candidates to demonstrate their capabilities. It has been important to ensure Indigenous assessors in these centres. They have successfully recruited Indigenous staff through cadetships in social work, law and psychology. The Aboriginal Services Unit has been important in developing resources and providing support to Indigenous workers
- The Northern Territory's plan is to develop Aboriginal case workers (mainly non-qualified) into para-professionals. A specific workforce plan, and Learning Pathways Program, recommendations from the 2010 Board of Inquiry, are progressing and recognise the big, untapped Indigenous workforce in the Northern Territory:
  - They are offering learning pathways to support career progression of the Indigenous child protection workforce from Certificate III in Community Services onto Diploma in Child Youth and Family Intervention and the Vocational Graduate Certificate in Community Services (Statutory child protection). These pathways will be supported by structured Language, Numeracy and Literacy (LLN) assistance
  - It considers that community services training packages can provide entry points into the workforce, including into child protection
  - It identifies the need to engage better with schools to lift the profile and idea of working in care and protection for Aboriginal young people.

CALD workforce strategies did not figure prominently in consultations.

### ***5.5.6 Retention issues across jurisdictions***

In summary, some key retention concerns were noted across several jurisdictions:

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- Some jurisdictions identified that they still needed to improve retention, whilst a smaller number of jurisdictions are happy with the way their retention rates are developing. It is understood that more evaluation is needed to determine the extent to which new strategies are working to place the right people in the right jobs and keep them there for the right length of time
- Building positive workplace cultures. All jurisdictions are attempting changes to promote positive workplace cultures using a range of strategies. It is acknowledged in the jurisdictions that these take time to implement
- Several jurisdictions considered that it would be desirable if educational providers could provide more qualifications which include child protection-relevant units. This would mean that child protection authorities would have to do less training of new recruits
- Building a diverse and culturally competent workforce and, more particularly, increasing Indigenous participation was acknowledged as a major challenge which had to be met in order to meet the needs of Indigenous children and families in Australia.



**Summary of retention strategies and issues in jurisdictions**

The aim is to retain the 'right' people for the jobs in order to provide quality services. There are four main categories of retention strategies evident from the consultations with the jurisdictions: incentives; professional development, including core training; building a supportive workplace environment; and job redesign, together with opportunities for career progression. Indigenous recruitment and retention strategies are developing, particularly in jurisdictions with higher proportions of Indigenous citizens.

Some jurisdictions identified indicated that they still needed to improve retention. More evaluation is needed to determine the extent to which new strategies are working to place the right people in the right jobs and keep them there for the right length of time. It takes time to build positive workplace cultures. If educational providers could provide offer more qualifications which include child protection- relevant units, child protection authorities would have to do less training of new recruits.

Indigenous recruitment and retention remains a challenge.

CALD workforce strategies did not figure prominently in consultations.

## **6. Possible future directions—development of capacity and expertise**

### **6.1 Introduction**

From the above outline of consultation findings, it can be seen that states and territories are developing and implementing retention and recruitment strategies within increasingly sophisticated workforce planning policy environments. It is not always easy to point to evaluated strategies, an experience common to other countries' workforce initiatives (Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, 2005). This is related to the nature of child protection as an open system affected by constant change within and outside the system; rigorous evaluation is challenging in an environment of constant change. In addition, many of the strategies outlined above are relatively new, and, while there may be data collection mechanisms in place to evaluate success, it may be too soon to do so in some jurisdictions. Other jurisdictions may have the data which enable such evaluation to build evidence about effective strategies.

One of the tasks of this project was to identify some possible future directions or priorities for the development of capacity and expertise of the statutory child protection workforce from a national perspective. In doing this, we are mindful of the complexities involved in considering priorities for a statutory workforce situated within individual states and territories' legislative, policy and political frameworks. Nevertheless, considerable success has been achieved in progressing the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2012). We acknowledge that implementation of any decisions on priorities will take time and considerable work, as workforce planning and capacity building in child protection from a national perspective is at its beginning stages.

In this discussion, we draw upon the consultations conducted with the states and territories as well as the collaborative workshopping of ideas which occurred on 24 May 2012 with state and territory representatives of the Building Capacity and Expertise National Framework Implementation Working Group Sub Working Group. At this workshop, participants discussed an overview of the findings from the consultations and identified some possible future directions emerging from these findings which could further develop the capacity and expertise of the statutory child protection workforce.

The discussion which follows identifies possible future directions at a general and preliminary level, while at the same time endeavouring to canvass the range of

dimensions which each direction could encompass. Scoping work would be required to advance any of these possibilities:

- National data development to enable workforce assessment and planning
- Establishment of a professional entity and promotion of national standards and education
- Para-professional workforce development
- Pre-employment capacity building, particularly for Indigenous young people.

## **6.2 Data development for workforce assessment and planning**

To undertake sophisticated workforce planning at both state/territory and national levels, comprehensive data are needed. Whilst states and territories have their own data systems, they are not necessarily conducive to the building of a national picture of the child protection workforce (statutory and the wider child protection workforce). With agreed variables and counting rules, such data would facilitate the evaluation of recruitment, retention and workforce development strategies. Data are quickly out of date, so, to be effective, these data need to be routinely collected and recorded to enable retrieval when required. Such a project would need resources.

As is to be expected with state and territory responsibilities, data collection in child protection in general has developed on a state by state basis. Under the National Framework, states and territories are working together with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to develop a unit record data collection of child protection clients which will enable more comprehensive reporting against Framework supporting outcomes and improve the comparability of data between jurisdictions (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). A similar unit-level record of carers of children within the child protection system is also under development.

Like the data developments for children's and carers' unit records, a national data development project appears to be needed to build a national workforce plan. Whilst all jurisdictions have many innovative strategies in place or in the pipeline for recruitment, retention and workforce development, the ability to assess their effectiveness and to share this knowledge is limited by the data collected. The need for data is critical if workforce planning is to proceed in a systematic and evidence-based manner and to answer questions such as: 'To what extent are the 'right' people being retained?'

### **6.3 Possible national entity—national standards and education**

The consultations with jurisdictions identified a widely held view that professional leadership is needed for the statutory child protection workforce. It was suggested that this could be provided under the auspice of a new entity, possibly a college or other national entity.

Considerable state and territory resources are currently devoted to identifying the qualifications and attributes, the professional qualities, needed for statutory child protection work and seeking to access these from the supply of workers available. Agreement on the nature of the statutory child protection practitioner role is critical to the identification of these qualities and attributes and to the development of a professional identity for this workforce. Discussion of this would form part of the scoping needed to advance the development of an entity designed to provide professional leadership. Some of this discussion was canvassed in an earlier section of this report, on job design. The debate centres on whether the job consists of complex family work, requiring holistic and comprehensive child and family practitioner skills, including investigatory skills, or whether the statutory child protection practitioner performs a narrow, forensic, investigatory role only. Most of our informants were of the view that statutory child protection was complex family work and that taking a narrow forensic approach was deleterious to the families thus serviced. However, some considered that this needs to be questioned in the light of changing service provision arrangements, where non-government agencies are performing family work previously undertaken by statutory workers.

An important task would be scoping suitable models for an entity to provide professional leadership:

- One possible model would be a membership-based model, such as the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Royal College of Nursing Australia, the Australian Human Resources Institute or the Australasian Housing Institute. In the child protection area, the now defunct Australian College for Child and Family Protection Practitioners ran several successful and well attended conferences before ceasing operations early in 2012 due to financial difficulties. This was a membership-based organisation with significant private funding. It led to the formation of a refereed journal, *Communities, Children and Families Australia*, which is still in publication. However, one learning from this experience is that a volunteer organisation funded by membership of individual child protection practitioners alone does

not yield the financial basis upon which to undertake the range of professional and educational activities needed

- Due to the unique nature of child protection, and particularly statutory child protection, another model of state/territory/Commonwealth collaborative organisation may be necessary to undertake any of the functions suggested.

A number of professionalising activities, drawn from the needs and ideas generated in consultations and the workshop in May, were considered important for further building the capacity of the statutory child protection workforce. A national entity would be one way in which these activities could be progressed. The following were identified as needing further exploration:

- Development of a national capability framework for statutory child protection workers
- The feasibility of common minimum qualifications standards
- The possibility of standardised core training and professional development through a national training program
- The possibility of developing and delivering a national postgraduate qualification in child protection on top of psychology or social work or other qualification
- Building professional recognition of the child protection workforce
- Annual national conference
- Development of national resources to help support practice
- Funding/promoting innovative practice and its evaluation
- Workforce research.

A number of these functions, particularly those related to professional knowledge and skills identification and development, are interlocking. They are discussed in more detail below.

### **1. Development of a national capability framework for statutory child protection workers**

Capability frameworks are increasingly being used to articulate the required application of knowledge, skills and attitudes in organisation and professions at different levels. A capability can be defined as 'an integrated application of knowledge where the student or practitioner can adapt to change, develop new behaviours and continue to improve performance' (Walsh, Gordon, Marshall, Wilson, & Hunt, 2005, pp.232-233). State governments are increasingly developing capability frameworks for their public services (Queensland

Government, 2008; State Government of Victoria State Services Authority, 2006). Service delivery non-government organisations are also developing these as a way of targeting recruitment and workforce development (Berry Street, undated). In the UK recently, the Social Work Reform Board has developed a capability framework for social workers which explicitly articulates basic social work education and a one-year Newly Qualified Social Worker/Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (Social Work Reform Board, 2012). Victoria has developed a child protection capability framework (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2012) which aligns with the Victorian public service capability framework.

The development of a national capability framework for statutory child protection would require a robust debate about the nature of the statutory child protection role in relation to other child protection roles, including those of para-professionals in statutory work. It is important that the specific role of the statutory child protection practitioner is not lost during this discussion.

## **2. Exploration of the feasibility of identifying common minimum qualification standards**

Part of the development of a national capability framework may involve exploring the possibility of identifying common minimum qualification standards.

Again, and integrally related to the issue of the role of the statutory child protection worker, this is a contested area. As outlined earlier in this report, while it is common for social work to be a preferred qualification in some states and territories, it is also acknowledged by states and territories that: there are not enough social work graduates interested in statutory child protection to meet workforce needs; some social work graduates and Schools of Social Work do not seem to be comfortable with a statutory role for social work, and this affects the capacity of graduates to perform a statutory role; people with other qualifications can perform the role; and not all people with preferred qualifications have the capability for the role of child protection worker. The importance of sufficient diversity in the workforce and of the capacity to recruit Indigenous workers would need to be taken into account when exploring this possibility.

Scoping the development of common minimum standards could involve consultation and liaison with University and VET course providers. It could also involve consultation with professional bodies such as the Australian Psychological Society (APS), the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW), who

accredit courses. It could become broader than this and involve a mapping of current educational providers, including providers of VET sector courses, linkages with child protection agencies and opportunities for articulation to enable Certificate and Diploma-qualified people to obtain degree-level qualifications.

Many states and territories expressed the view that new graduates were not, and possibly could not be, fully 'role ready' for statutory child protection work. It was noted that, if education providers could cover certain agreed content and skills relevant to statutory child protection work, that would reduce the resources which the states and territories need to devote to training.

### **3. Exploration of the possibility of standardised core training and professional development through a national training program**

If it were agreed that a need exists for national consistency around professionalisation of the workforce, some standardised core training and professional development could result in efficiencies and improvement in service. At present, both larger and smaller jurisdictions are required to invest significantly in training, and synergies could result from standardised training. It is also important to recognise local contextual requirements, conditions and already existing arrangements.

Some states and territories identified the mobility of the workforce as a factor which points to the value of such standardised core training and professional development. For example, both New South Wales and Queensland noted that, in Northern New South Wales and South East Queensland, there is considerable workforce overlap.

Currently, the Australian Child Protection Learning and Development Forum meets twice yearly, which enables sharing of teaching and learning resources, and this forum could play a valuable role in the new entity.

### **4. Exploration of the possibility of developing and delivering a national postgraduate qualification in child protection on top of psychology or social work or other qualification**

This national postgraduate qualification would be another initiative that would ideally, but not necessarily, fit within an agreed national capability framework in child protection or agreed minimum qualification standards, standardised core training and professional development. Once again, there may be synergies and efficiencies in pooling resources devoted to the development of postgraduate qualifications.

States and territories pointed to a number of postgraduate courses in child protection run through partnerships with universities, and funded or partially funded by the statutory child protection agency, which had been well received by child protection workers. Due to changes in policies and partnerships, some have not continued.

Another model of postgraduate qualification was the Vocational Graduate Certificate in Community Services Practice (Client assessment and case management) and the Vocational Graduate Certificate in Community Services Practice (Statutory Child Protection) delivered by Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services in partnership with the Sunshine Coast Institute of TAFE.

One area to be explored is the relative weight attached to the purposes of encouraging these qualifications and the consequences of this weighting. For example, if the main purpose is to promote retention, would there be a bonded period after completion of the funded qualification, or is the period of service completed during the time taken to complete the qualification enough? If the main purpose is to increase the quality of work undertaken, does promotion need to be contingent upon completion of these qualifications?

### **5. Building professional recognition of the child protection workforce**

It was considered that the whole child protection workforce, including the non-government family support and out-of-home care sector, requires greater professional and public recognition. A national entity could undertake publicity programs to promote the positive aspects of child protection work and the professional nature of the work.

### **6. Annual national conference**

A conference similar to the highly successful Family Relationship Services Australia annual conference (co-funded by FaHCSIA) could function to support innovation and exchange of ideas. It was suggested that many state and territory governments cannot afford to send many workers to conferences, and that most current Australian conferences are not of direct relevance to workers in statutory child protection.

### **7. Development of national resources to help support practice**

Previously, the Child Protection Clearinghouse played a role in the sharing of national resources to support child protection practice. The Clearinghouse is now part of Child Family and Community Australia (<http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/about.html>).



On the basis of the consultations, it appeared that participants were seeking a location where national resources associated with both statutory child protection workforce planning and development and child protection practice (for example, good practice guidelines) could be collected and shared.

#### **8. Funding/promoting innovative practice and its evaluation**

A national entity may be able to support innovation, for example:

- The Bathurst Mudgee trial project in New South Wales , previously discussed, which uses group supervision and shared decision making
- Cross-jurisdictional practice across the north of Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory (similar to the policing arrangements across the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands).

#### **9. Workforce research**

Research areas relevant to workforce development which would have national relevance include researching effective strategies for developing the resilient worker.

### **6.4 Para-professional workforce development**

Para-professional workforce development may be linked with the work of the possible national entity. Given the possible development of a national capability framework and the need to clarify work roles and job design in statutory child protection, consistent with a national capability framework, this would be a logical development. Whilst some jurisdictions have para-professional roles in statutory child protection, others do not. This topic is treated in this report as a separate future direction, due to its potential for addressing the need for greater participation for Indigenous and culturally diverse staff in statutory child protection work.

There are two main drivers to the proposed future direction of para-professional workforce development:

1. The potential for para-professionals to take on roles which do not require professional workers, hence freeing the professional workers for the complex family work they are trained to do. It is known from inquiries and the recent Munro report (2011) in the United Kingdom that some statutory child protection workers are not able to complete the face-to-face work needed with families due to bureaucratic requirements of the role

2. In some locations, for example, Northern Territory and Queensland, para-professionals (Client Safety Support Officers—CSSOs in Queensland), provide continuity of workers in rural and remote locations and cultural knowledge through their membership of Indigenous and culturally diverse groups.

In rural and remote areas, one possibility may be that the development of the para-professional could be undertaken in conjunction with other occupational areas, such as education, health and policing, as part of a general community services qualification package through the VET sector. Separate modules could then be added for the specific areas of work, for example, child protection.

Pathways may then be developed for para-professionals to achieve a professional-level qualification, depending on the national capability and qualifications framework developed. One example of this transition is in Queensland, where there was a pilot project enabling CSSOs to undertake the Vocational Graduate Certificate which provided the qualification needed to become the professional-level Client Support Officers. A number of those successfully completing the Graduate Certificate in this pilot were Indigenous people.

## **6.5 Pre-employment capacity building**

It was noted in the consultations and the workshop that, to increase the proportion of Indigenous workers in child protection to the level needed, more work is required to build pre-employment capacity. Awareness of the nature and potential of work in human service occupations and readiness of candidates to undertake the work is currently limited. It is important that Indigenous communities and stakeholders are engaged early in defining the need for, and the appropriate steps to be taken to forge, educational/employment pathways.

Creative approaches are needed to break down existing barriers to educational opportunities and scholarships to create pathways through school to human service work. This may extend back to developing relationships with schools, so that young people are available for human service work through the provision of early learning and employment opportunities. Cross-agency mentoring and other approaches could be explored to identify strategies to promote these pathways. For example, in the Northern Territory and in other jurisdictions, there is a notable need to focus on Language, Literacy and Numeracy issues before, or alongside, more specialised human services input. There is a need to improve supply and quality of candidates to undertake work in human services which relies not on a qualification alone but on relevant experience. It was noted that there is a need to identify, through the VET sector and universities, appropriate skill development and qualification pathways to

critical human service jobs. Funding for coaches and placement mentors is required as part of these processes.

**Summary—Possible future directions—development of capacity and expertise**

**National data development to enable workforce planning.** Whilst states and territories have their own data systems, they are not necessarily conducive to the building of a national picture of the child protection workforce (statutory and the wider child protection workforce). With agreed variables and counting rules, such data would facilitate the evaluation of recruitment, retention and workforce development strategies.

**Development of national standards and education possibly through a national entity.** There was a widely held view that professional leadership is needed for the statutory child protection workforce. Considerable state and territory resources are currently devoted to identifying the qualifications and attributes needed for statutory child protection work and seeking to access these from the supply of workers available. Agreement on the nature of the statutory child protection practitioner role is critical to the identification of these qualities and attributes and to the development of a professional identity for this workforce. Development of a national capability framework and minimum educational standards, and raising a positive profile for child protection practitioners, could be part of this process.

**Para-professional workforce development.** This may be linked with the work of the possible national entity, through the development of a national capability framework. This future direction has potential for addressing the need for greater participation of Indigenous and culturally diverse staff in statutory child protection work and for freeing up professional workers for complex work with families and children.

**Pre-employment capacity building, particularly for Indigenous young people.** To increase the proportion of Indigenous workers in child protection to the level needed, more work is required to build pre-employment capacity. It is important that Indigenous communities and stakeholders are engaged early in defining the need for, and the appropriate steps to be taken to forge, educational/employment pathways. Creative approaches are needed to break down existing barriers to educational opportunities and scholarships to create pathways through school to human service work.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Consultation discussion guide**

#### **Current workforce situation**

1. How would you describe your current workforce situation?
2. To what do you attribute this situation (e.g. are there particular events, contextual factors, strategies contributing to this)?
3. What knowledge values and skills do you think are required to make a satisfactory entry level child protection worker?
4. What qualifications currently meet this requirement?
5. To what extent are you able to recruit and retain people with these qualifications?

#### **Recruitment**

6. What (other) local trends impact upon recruitment?
7. (eg local contextual factors, child protection systemic issues, any recent changes which have impacted on recruitment, regional differences?)
8. What recruitment strategies have you implemented?
9. eg internal strategies such as internships, career pathways, incentives?
10. eg external strategies such as placements, overseas recruitment, partnerships?
11. How have these strategies worked out? (How do you gauge their effectiveness?)
12. To what extent have the strategies succeeded in attracting workers from culturally diverse groups including Indigenous workers?
13. What, if any, future plans do you have for recruitment strategies? (How did you arrive at these ideas?)



## **Retention**

14. What (other) local trends impact upon retention?
15. (eg local contextual factors, child protection systemic issues, any recent changes which have impacted on retention, perhaps inquiries, regional differences?)
16. What strategies do you have in place for supporting and developing the workforce?
17. How have these strategies worked out? (How do you gauge their effectiveness?)
18. Can you tell us about your core training? Eg how long, how has it changed? How is it assessed? Is it articulated with any educational institutions?
19. How do you find out what your CP workers' professional development needs are? Are there particular needs which dominate?
20. How do you go about meeting these professional development needs? To what extent are the facilities/ trainers/ courses available to meet these needs? (What system is in place for ongoing training, professional development?)
21. What is your model of supervision? (How effective is supervision in supporting staff? How do you know it happens?)
22. What strategies do you use to retain workers from culturally diverse groups including Indigenous workers?
23. What, if any, future plans do you have for recruitment strategies? (How did you arrive at these ideas?)

## **State/Territory and National initiatives**

24. What recruitment and retention initiatives are best driven at state/territory level and which at Commonwealth level?

## Appendix B: Workforce Survey

An Excel worksheet was drawn up seeking the following information:

As at 30<sup>th</sup> June 2011

1. Child protection workforce classification and roles
2. Numbers by classification
3. Total number
4. Ages and gender
5. Qualifications
  - Number with Degree in social science?
  - Number with Degree in Social Work?
  - Number Degree in psychology?
  - Number with other degree (not elsewhere classified)
  - Number with Diploma level qualification
  - Number with Certificate level qualification
  - Number with no tertiary qualification
6. Amount of experience in roles (e. g. less than 2 years, 2–5 years; greater than 5 years)
7. Percentage leaving every year
8. Distribution—rural and metropolitan
9. Growth of workforce between June 2006 and June 2011
10. Growth per CPW classification
11. Growth per region