

Part 8: Implementation and conclusion

Chapter 23:

Conclusion

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Child abuse and neglect have a devastating impact on the lives of children. The Inquiry has presented system-level evidence of the extent of the problem but has also heard the experiences of children and young people involved with child protection, their families and foster and kinship carers. The Inquiry has also heard from adults who experienced state care as children.

The Inquiry has concluded that prevention and early intervention are essential to avoid the long-lasting permanent trauma and poor outcomes for many individuals who experience abuse or neglect. At a system level, the Inquiry has also concluded that, over time, it is more effective for government to invest in prevention and early intervention, than to continue to increase investment in child protection and family services or to absorb the lifetime costs to society of child abuse and neglect.

The past 20 years have seen a large number of reviews and inquiries seeking improvements in the policy and service delivery framework put in place by government for protecting Victoria's vulnerable children. The Victorian Ombudsman has presented a number of major reports to Parliament highlighting concerns about various aspects of statutory child protection services and the provision of out-of-home care. Significant changes have been made over that period, but changes have also been made incrementally in response to issues. It is tempting to see each issue as requiring a separate solution. This Inquiry had the benefit of wide Terms of Reference which enabled identification of common risk factors, examination of a wide range of pertinent issues and facilitated a holistic response.

The number of reports of concern made about children and young people to the Department of Human Services (DHS) stands at 55,000 for 2010-11 and is expected to continue to rise.

The number of children and young people in out-of-home care has also increased over the past decade and this has been driven by an increase in the amount of time children are spending in care when it is not safe for them to return to their birth families.

Child abuse and neglect can occur in any family in Victoria, but the Inquiry has found that child vulnerability is particularly visible in certain geographic areas, especially in regional areas. Additionally, Victoria's Aboriginal children and young people have markedly higher interactions with the statutory child protection system.

The Inquiry has heard that vulnerable children and their families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have difficulty interacting with family service providers and statutory child protection services when their cultural and religious differences are not understood.

The extent of their involvement with child protection and family services is not known, due to a lack of data. This has inhibited the development of recommendations by the Inquiry in relation to children, young people and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The Inquiry considers that the recommendations set out in this Report will equip Victoria's system for protecting children to become:

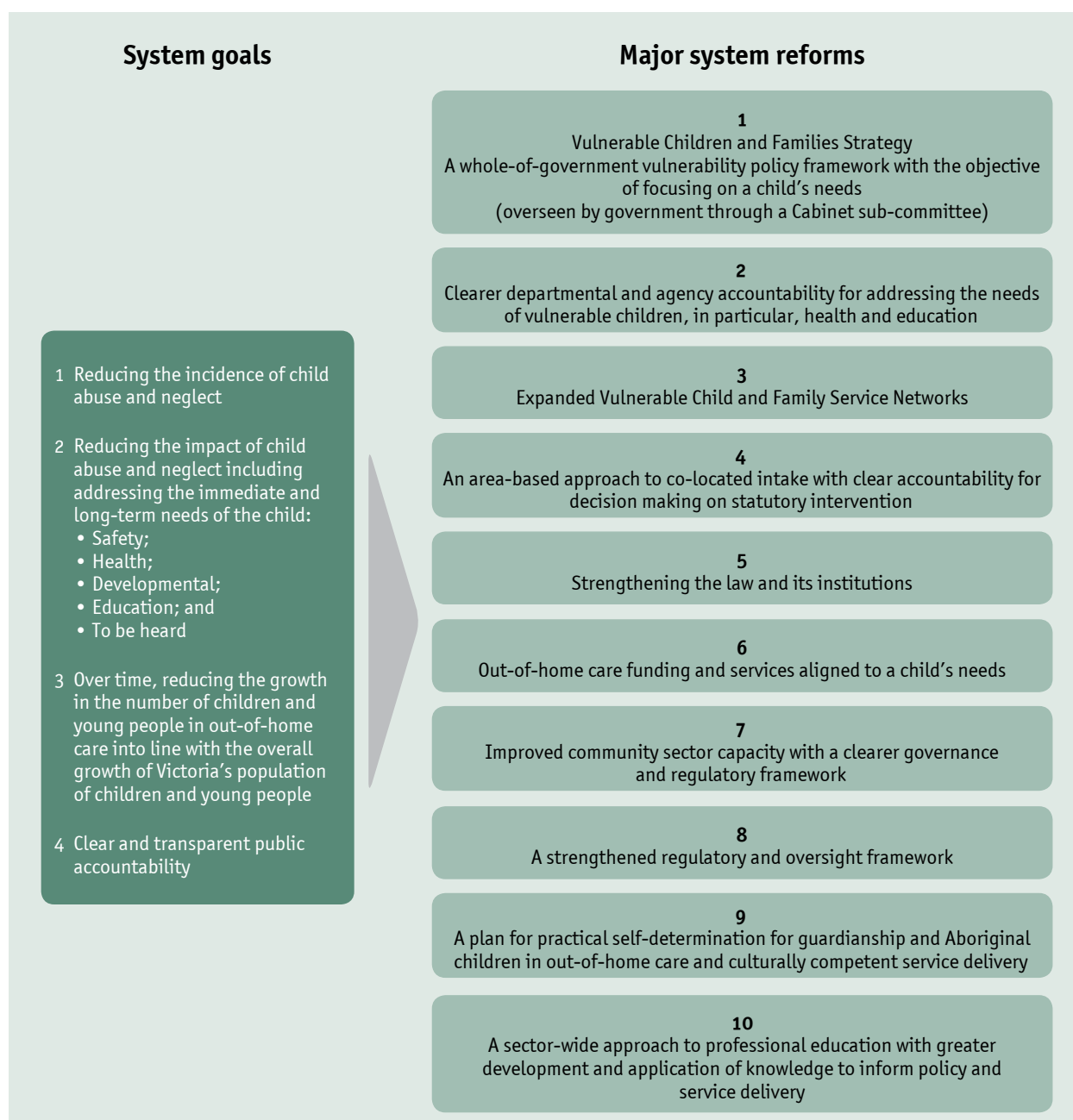
- More focused on meeting the needs of children and young people in Victoria's system for protecting children, including those placed in out-of-home care, through family services and through specialist adult services whose clients may be parents and, importantly, how their needs and views are addressed through processes related to the Children's Court;
- More responsive to families needing parenting support and guidance;
- More forward-looking over time as the Vulnerable Children and Families Strategy is developed, new information systems are developed and better data is collected and demand based funding models are developed and implemented;
- More accountable, with the responsibilities of government agencies, and as the role of CSOs and the focus and function of a broader range of government funded services in reducing and addressing vulnerability becoming clearer. A new Commission for Children and Young People holds key agencies to account for their performance; and
- More transparent as more information is released publicly by DHS about the child protection system.

The Report concludes that there has been a significant failure to recognise the crimes of child physical and sexual abuse. The Report shows the way forward for this recognition, for holding perpetrators responsible, and for the protection of vulnerable children from these crimes.

The 10 major system reforms (see Figure 23.1) contain major changes to address the contributing factors to child abuse and neglect and the potential for increased prevention through effective, coordinated early interventions. This requires a whole-of-government strategic approach, driven at Cabinet level by government, supported by a strengthened

Children's Services Coordination Board and overseen by a Commission for Children and Young People. The implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations requires many parts of Victorian Government, its departments and agencies, and government funded CSOs to work together and share responsibility to protect Victoria's vulnerable children.

Figure 23.1 Major system reforms for protecting children through a system that prevents and responds to child abuse and neglect



The recommendations proposed cover a spectrum of areas, ranging from strengthening early intervention services, to more collaborative problem solving approach to protective concerns in the Children's Court, to the way reports of concern about children are handled and referred by DHS, to funding mechanisms for out-of-home care service delivery and workforce reforms.

For these reforms to be successful, they will rely on the foundations found in all effective service systems. These foundations include strong leadership, clear accountability mechanisms for reporting on progress against objectives, adequate levels of resourcing and a skilled and stable workforce.

Skilled staff are required not only in child protection services but also in related family, health and legal services and sectors. An effective workforce is supported through change or reform, provided with appropriate professional education and an operating environment that promotes collaboration.

The reforms will also require the willing collaboration of community service organisations with enhanced capacity to engage with the new service environment outlined in the recommendations.

Collaboration is also a major focus for how DHS and other departments must operate in the future. All agencies and departments across government that provide services to children and families must accept their particular responsibility and be held to account for the ways in which they work together to more effectively address the needs of Victoria's vulnerable children.

Victoria relies heavily on its community sector for delivery of a wide range of services for vulnerable children and young people. A future system for protecting children will build community sector capability and provide a clear and transparent accountability and regulatory framework to promote responsive and high quality service delivery.

The Inquiry observed first-hand the dedication and commitment of those individuals involved in working with vulnerable children and their families, sometimes on a voluntary basis, to improve their experiences and chances in life. These individuals reflect the powerful role that community and families can play in supporting and protecting our vulnerable children.

The resilience of our communities and family and friendship networks can ultimately make the difference between a family that is struggling to meet the needs of its children, and one that can cope with and manage what might seem like intolerable and insurmountable challenges. The Inquiry recognises the role of the community and emphasises that the nature of child abuse and neglect is a problem that society and government share responsibility for addressing.

The problems seen by DHS and statutory child protection services are an indicator of the complex difficulties experienced by some Victorian families that cut across social, economic and cultural boundaries. Successfully addressing these issues will demand commitment by the many other portfolios of government including health, education, justice and housing. These problems cannot be tackled solely by the child protection system. The recommendations contained in this Report acknowledge this and propose a more holistic framework for better responding to child abuse and neglect.

At the heart of the Inquiry's recommendations, is a focus on meeting the needs of Victoria's vulnerable children and young people. Adopting such a focus will be critical for ensuring the success of a lasting reform agenda to address child abuse and neglect of Victoria's most vulnerable citizens.

