

3.1: Integrated Service Delivery

Ensuring a shared understanding of the nature of child abuse in Victoria has been a foundational step in creating a more integrated service response. The *Children Youth and Families Act (2005)*, the *Best Interests Assessment and Case Practice Framework* and the *Strategic Framework for Family Services (2007)* inform our understanding of the risks and needs of vulnerable children and their families in Victoria.

Integrated responses to protect vulnerable children derive clear benefits for service delivery by improving the experience of children and families involved in multiple programs and services and providing a more seamless transition through psycho-social and legal service contexts. Integration enables networks to be formed across services and government departments at a local level, fostering collaboration and communication between universal, secondary and tertiary services and providing ongoing improvements to practice and understanding.

Child FIRST Alliances provide a more integrated approach to protecting vulnerable children in Victoria than previous systems. The key strengths of Alliances include common principles and objectives, mechanisms for inter-agency collaboration, procedures for information sharing and improved access to service for vulnerable families by minimising inefficiencies in case allocation and information sharing. The process of developing common principles and objectives has involved all of the participating agencies and organisations including those working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities. Integrating dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategies and services into the mainstream has begun a process of strengthening the response of mainstream agencies to Indigenous victims of child abuse. The development process itself has been a vital point of contact and empowerment for all involved which has the potential to provide a basis for ongoing and active collaboration between the agencies and is an essential ingredient of integration.

The increasingly integrated service delivery approach to the support of vulnerable children and families in Victoria has coincided with increases in reports to child protection throughout implementation of the reforms. This may be partially attributed to reform measures themselves, media attention and the Ombudsman's own motion investigation into the Department of Human Services Child Protection Program. A positive attribution of these statistics may be that more children are being protected, but the figures also accentuate the fact that Child Protective Services are becoming overloaded. In the absence of a corresponding increase in resources, pressure to reduce the demand on our service system remains apparent.

Risk assessment utilising shared knowledge and resources has become the means by which demand is reduced through directing resources to the most vulnerable children. A major concern with demand being regulated by assessment is that in practice working definitions of what constitutes 'risk' and 'safety' are influenced by the pressure of demand. An example of this is the treatment of 'cumulative harm' in

practice, and the extent to which this has not been recognised in the absence of an overwhelming or immediate event occurring which places a child at risk. Our evidence-based approach to practice is at risk of being unintentionally redefined by demand pressures. The extent to which risk assessment is problematic requires further research and may assist to close the gap between Child Protection and Family Services.

3.2: Workforce Development Issues

One of the most significant challenges in the move toward an integrated service response has been the need for adequate resourcing, training and support for staff. In Family Services, staff experience pressure to undertake tasks of greater complexity as a result of recent legislative and operational changes. The lack of resources available to 'skill up' staff has posed significant challenges to operational managers in Family Services. A strong need exists to introduce more specialised and experienced practitioners to encourage and support staff sector wide.

Child and Family Services Alliances face ongoing challenges in ensuring the active involvement with staff at a foundation level in the overall development and sustainability of a more integrated service response. Direct service staff should be more openly involved in Alliance governance. At present, integration occurs primarily at a managerial and planning level through working parties, strategic planning and the development of Alliance protocols and procedures. There still exists a great need for enhanced collaboration and cooperation particularly between Child Protection and Family Services at the grass roots level. Close collaboration and consultation with Child Protection and Family Services staff providing direct service to children and families is imperative to ensure that our integrated service response is grounded by practical experience.

3.3 & 3.4: Child FIRST & Family Services

The resource intensive nature of collaboration cannot be denied. Enhancing collaboration and integration at a foundation level will require an injection of resources and training initiatives into Child Protection and Family Services. There exists a strong need for joint case management of the most complex and vulnerable children and families, joint training and induction programs and the co-location and close proximity of Child Protection and Family Services where possible to improve families' access to a seamless and cohesive service response with a range of options and referrals.

Preliminary findings of the Evaluation of Child and Family Services reforms completed by KPMG provides evidence of increasing complexity of Integrated Family Services cases and a documented increase in the requirement for longer term case work. There is clear indication that longer term case work is necessary to prevent the

recurring need for intervention where abuse has been substantiated in the past. The tension between outcomes and unallocated cases underpinned by pressure from the service system and demand drivers has been responsible for the evolution of a throughput model of service delivery. The capacity of Family Services to actively engage children and their families is reduced by demand pressures. As a result, worker satisfaction and confidence in their ability to make a difference for children and their families is severely impacted.

Staff employed in Child Protection and Family Services are dealing with complex issues and the most vulnerable children and families in society. A broad range of evidence across a number of jurisdictions indicates there is a strong co-relation between tertiary qualified staff and consistent quality outcomes. Care teams in child and family services must work to this end and as a result there has been an impact on the funding and pay structures in these services. Professionally trained staff will command professional salaries. The prevailing practice is that Family Services work is seen as para-professional and it is a commonly held notion that people can be 'skilled up', therefore pay rates are low. Our workforce is under-skilled and under resourced and this presents a serious structural issue in the protection of vulnerable children and families in Victoria.

High case loads, unallocated cases, inadequate resources and limited training and development opportunities result in direct service staff suffering burnout and staff turnover is significant. It is imperative to review the nature of work completed by child protection and family services practitioners. It will be important in moving forward to ensure that workloads are structured to reduce stress placed on staff and to improve outcomes for clients. Serious consideration is required in relation to the qualifications, caseloads, work structures, support structures and the remuneration of staff in Child Protection and Family Services.

Local government family support agencies have experienced a significant increase in local intake of Family Services over the last three years due to increasing risk thresholds and families being unable to access Child Protection or Integrated Family Services. The role of local government in providing ongoing services to these families is an important strategy in the prevention of escalation of risk and need to children and their families within local communities. Early intervention and local intake family services provided by local government are an essential adjunct to Child Protection and Integrated Family Services and should be duly resourced. Additional benefits of these services include strong links with co-located universal services such as Maternal and Child Health and other targeted disability or enhanced maternal and child health services providing accessibility to a range of options and support streams for children and families.

3.4: Statutory Child Protection Services

In practice, statutory child protection services have the capacity to respond only to the extreme cases of child abuse in Victoria and their capacity for specialised follow up is limited. Vulnerable children and families should have fast tracked, no cost and seamless access to universal and specialised services to ensure that victims of child abuse do not fall into the gaps between agencies and systems working in isolation of each other. It is important to reiterate that strategies to encourage joint reflective practice between child protection and family services are crucial to reduce the likelihood of conflict occurring between the approach and measures adopted by practitioners in complex cases.

The introduction of a Community Based Child Protection worker in every Child FIRST catchment was a positive step toward increasing collaboration between Child Protection and Family Services. However demand pressures and competing protocols and work practices may be more effectively mediated through the opportunity to engage in more joint case management practice with statutory child protection services. At a foundation level child protection and family services work in isolation of each other. The mere involvement of a family service agency is deemed to be a protective factor that often results in closure of a statutory intervention. It is untenable for statutory Child Protection services and Family Services to be seen as mutually exclusive where children are at risk.

One of the unintended consequences of mandatory reporting in Victoria, is that the quantity of reports is simply impossible for any service system to adequately resource and respond to. This problem lends itself to a number of unpalatable choices such as to more narrowly define what constitutes reportable abuse, more clearly define what can reasonably be responded to or to abandon mandatory reporting and explore expansion in criminal law to manage the more complex cases.