



AASW

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Australian Association
of Social Workers

Serious Concerns about Children in State Care

Child Safety Commission of Inquiry

AUGUST 2025

About the Australian Association of Social Workers

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the national professional body representing more than 17,000 social workers throughout Australia.

The AASW works to promote the profession of social work including setting the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work, while also advocating on matters of human rights to advance social justice.

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Executive Summary

The AASW welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Queensland Child Safety Commission of Inquiry.

The Commission is correct to identify existing procedures to report serious safety concerns about children under the care of the state as an area that needs urgent attention. None of the members of the AASW who were consulted for this submission reported that in their experience the existing systems or procedures are consistently and effectively addressing safety concerns. Our existing systems are failing children and young people.

The AASW makes a number of recommendations to improve these systems, including developing specialised investigation services, improving information sharing processes, reviewing the discharge escalation pathway for children at risk.

This submission also goes broader than complaints procedures given there are various factors that are putting pressures on the system which are increasing safety risks and reducing the capacity of the system to respond to concerns for children and young people in state care.

Greater investment in prevention, early intervention and home and family support services is required. Expanded options for placements in care, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, are required, in addition to more culturally safe services.

The Commission of Inquiry is undertaking critical work to support the rights and the health and wellbeing of the next generation. The AASW looks forward to building on this submission as the Commission of Inquiry makes further calls for submissions.

List of Recommendations

The AASW recommends:

- **Recommendation 1:** Expand the number of placement options available in residential and out of home care.
- **Recommendation 2:** Develop specialised investigation teams and enhance investigative processes to ensure timely and thorough completion of investigations.
- **Recommendation 3:** Review and improve the processes and capacity for information sharing under Section 159N of the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld).
- **Recommendation 4:** Evaluate the effectiveness of the Discharge escalation pathway for a child at risk in relation to children in state care.
- **Recommendation 5:** Evaluate police and medical screening procedures for residential service staff, foster and kinship carers.
- **Recommendation 6:** Review prevention and early intervention services, including identification of which regions in Queensland have gaps in service coverage.
- **Recommendation 7:** Explore gaps in service provision across Queensland.
- **Recommendation 8:** Increase in home support to keep children out of residential care.
- **Recommendation 9:** Identify early intervention and prevention pilots and other programs to scale up and roll-out across Queensland.
- **Recommendation 10:** Ensure every child in care has basic safety needs met.
- **Recommendation 11:** Address workforce challenges with a focus on child safety and support.
- **Recommendation 12:** Build Departmental capacity to undertake appropriate assessments prior to placements.
- **Recommendation 14:** Increase supports and services for kinship and foster carers.

Background information

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS: COMPLAINTS SYSTEM

The Commissioner, The Honourable Mr Paul Anastassiou KC, has invited submissions on the adequacy of existing complaints systems, procedures, and incident reporting guidelines for those wishing to raise serious safety concerns about children under the care of the state.

This includes safety and other concerns in relation to residential care facilities, foster and kinship care placements, and services delivered by funded service providers.

The role of social work in child safety and wellbeing.

Social workers work across a range of fields of practice centered on child safety and wellbeing. Social workers undertake various roles in both statutory child protection services and in child, youth and family services. For these roles social workers undertake assessments (including risk and placement assessments), provide therapeutic interventions and support and help navigate Department, legal and community services. This is in the context of complex and challenging social legal processes and decision-making while advocating for the rights and the best interests of children and young people.

Social workers complete either a Bachelor of Social Work (4-year university degree) or a Master of Social Work qualifying (2-year postgraduate university degree). This includes 1,000 hours of supervised social work placements. Social work degrees are accredited by the AASW according to the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS)¹.

The principles, values and professional competencies of social work are outlined in the AASW Code of Ethics (2020)² and the AASW Practice Standards (2023).³ To meet AASW standards, members undertake a program of Continuing Professional Development including independent supervision.⁴

Members consulted for this submission held a range of roles including in child protection (e.g. Child Safety Officers, child protection forensic medical services), Aboriginal Controlled Health Organisations, foster and kinship care assessments and support services, disability services, mental health clinicians with clients in state care and school social work. These social workers provide a range of assessments, services and programs and have developed frameworks to reduce abuse, neglect and exploitation of children in state care. Their expertise is essential for designing a system that protects the safety of children and young people.

The *AASW Position Statement on Child and Wellbeing (2020)* is attached to this submission. The position statement includes key elements of the social work platform, guiding principles and calls

¹ <https://www.aasw.asn.au/education-employment/higher-education-providers/asweas-2024/>

² <https://aasw-prod.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/AASW-Code-of-Ethics-2020.pdf>

³ <https://aasw-prod.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/AASW-Practice-Standards-FEB2023-1-1.pdf>

⁴ <https://aasw-prod.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/aasw-cpd-policy.pdf>

to government. Much of the Position Statement is relevant to the current work of the Commission of Inquiry.

Raising serious concerns about children in state care

Existing complaints processes are not keeping children and young people safe.

AASW members confirmed that there are significant deficiencies in complaints systems when reporting serious concerns about children in state care. All members consulted for this submission consistently reported that in their experience, serious complaints were not 'always addressed effectively'. Serious concerns were either not addressed well or were 'sometimes' addressed effectively.

The following case study is illustrative of many other case study examples:

"When working as a foster carer assessor, I was so concerned about conditions in the homes of the 'approved' foster carers I was visiting (usually for renewals; but at times when I followed up to undertake the initial assessment process many months after a child had been placed into an interim kind of arrangement). On one occasion, a child with significant disability was observed to be living in squalid conditions with 'approved' carers. I was doing a home visit in the evening; I contacted my employer (we were contractors for an independent assessment company), who followed up with the Department as to next steps and whether it was safe for me to leave the child there overnight. We were told that there was 'nowhere else for her to go'."

Numerous examples of unsafe and unsuitable living conditions were provided, including hazardous living conditions; children and young people being exposed to psychosocial risks and carers who were unable to provide the necessary family environment, even with the best of intentions.

Many of our members have similarly reported a lack of alternative placement options as a key reason for leaving children and young people in unsafe environments.

"The placement system is so stretched that placement matching is not done in any authentic manner. We place young people together in placements where they are not safe as a result of other young people in those placements."

The lack of safe alternatives for children at risk in response to serious concerns erodes overall trust in the system and reduces the likelihood that the broader community will make complaints.

Furthermore, the lack of a range of placement options in residential and out of home care limits the ability to place children and young people in the most appropriate setting for them. This is impacting on children and young people with specific needs including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTIQ+ children, multicultural children, children with disability, mental health or physical health issues, and other diverse groups of children and young people.

- **Recommendation 1:** Expand the number of appropriate placements options available to safely meet the diverse needs of children and young people.

The need for specialised investigation staff for serious concerns.

Investigations of suspected harm are currently undertaken by the same Child Safety Service Centres that case-manage the child, mostly by the Child Safety Officer (CSO). However, many CSO's do not have specialised expertise in investigations.

In addition, this is often undertaken on top of their existing workloads which has implications for thoroughness, timeliness, objectivity and their ability to provide services to existing clients. Additionally, the same service centre is the decision maker which poses inherent conflict of interest concerns. The combination of these factors can influence the integrity and independence of investigations that are truly focused on the best interests of the child or young person.

Investigations must be thorough, independent, undertaken by personnel with the appropriate experience, be trauma informed and timely. Ultimately the outcome must be the best interests of the child or young person. It is proposed that a specialised investigative service be developed with Department staff who are specifically trained to undertake this role without other CSO casework responsibilities.

Our members also noted that investigations of serious concerns, while necessary, can be disruptive for children and young people and the residential care services involved. During an investigation, children may be placed in respite, which can be disruptive for the young person without sufficient support.

The AASW is not proposing that KPIs are placed to drive down the time taken to complete investigations appropriately, at the expense of comprehensive and procedurally fair processes.

- **Recommendation 2:** Develop specialised investigation teams and enhance investigative processes to ensure timely and thorough completion of investigations.

Improved information sharing systems

Under Section 159N, of the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld) the Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety can formally request specific information about a child (or other relevant person, including an unborn child) from various entities (for example housing services, community services, corrective services, health and education providers).

Our members report difficulties in retrieving information in a timely manner. The process to complete information gathering under Section 159N is reportedly slow and the information is often provided too late to social workers.

Requests for information that span more than about 5 years are harder for Queensland Police Service to facilitate. Yet this information is necessary to be able to effectively undertake perpetrator mapping to then be able to properly risk assess the situation for the children (and the person experiencing violence).

- **Recommendation 3:** Review and improve the processes and capacity for information sharing under Section 159N of the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld).

Discharge escalation pathway for children at risk

The *Discharge escalation pathway for a child at risk tool* (Queensland Health) was put in place in July 2021.⁵ This pathway provides a process for medical officers concerned about children's safety upon discharge from a hospital. The tool is now part of business-as-usual processes which include ongoing monitoring of the pathway's use and periodic reviews.

In the context of this Commission of Inquiry, it is important to examine the implementation and effectiveness of the discharge escalation pathway specifically for children at risk into unsafe environments for children in state care.

- **Recommendation 4:** Evaluate the effectiveness of the Discharge escalation pathway for a child at risk in relation to children in state care.

Improving quality and regulation of relevant

In general, our members called for stronger screening processes and improved regulation in residential and kinship and foster care. In particular, the Commission should explore options for stronger police checks and medical clearances for relevant staff and carers. Our members provided multiple examples of children at risk from people who should not be responsible for caring for vulnerable people.

- **Recommendation 5:** Evaluate police and medical screening procedures for residential service staff, foster and kinship carers.

The need for investment in prevention and early intervention

While the Commission of Inquiry notes that costs of the state care systems have risen, the needs of children are still not being adequately met. Serious concerns and complaints are not being adequately addressed. Upstream investments in early prevention and early intervention and support helps to ease the pressures of crisis management and costly responses.

In particular, the AASW strongly recommends expansion of intensive in-home support to reduce the number of children who need to be placed in residential and out of home care.

The AASW encourages the Commission to review current spending on prevention and early intervention services in relation to crisis and reactive response services.

- **Recommendation 6:** Review prevention and early intervention services, including identification of which regions in Queensland have gaps in service coverage.
- **Recommendation 7:** Explore gaps in service provision across Queensland.
- **Recommendation 8:** Increased in home support to keep children out of residential care

⁵ The tool was created in response to a Coroner recommendation following the death of Mason Jet Lee See <https://www.courts.qld.gov.au/courts/coroners-court?a=657938#:~:text=Recommendation%206a&text=i.,ii>

- **Recommendation 9:** Identify early intervention and prevention pilots and other programs to scale up and roll-out across Queensland.

Residential Care

Improved and greater focus on safety.

More comprehensive training around safety concerns, particularly serious concerns, is required in residential care. Our members report that that even basic security is sometimes an issue in residential care, especially in remote communities. Our members provided examples of safety issues including one instance where doors and gates do not lock and close properly, allowing anyone to enter the property.

- **Recommendation 10:** Ensure every child in care has basic safety needs met.

The need for qualified and experienced staff

There are considerable workforce challenges to keep children and young people in state care safe and supported. As has been highlighted in previous child protection inquiries, there remains a lack of suitably qualified and experienced staff in residential care, particularly in remote areas. Ideally, given the complexity and risks involved, staff would have a social work degree as minimum.

In remote communities, staffing in funded service providers for children in state care is inconsistent, fluctuating and with high turnover. The AASW has been advised that staff often do not turn up for their shift and do not provide notice that they will be absent from work, which makes it hard for the team leaders and managers, and decreases safety and wellbeing for the children.

- **Recommendation 11:** Address workforce challenges with a focus on child safety and support.

Kinship and foster care

Assessments of foster and kinship carer

Our members provided examples of placements that have been made prior to home safety visits, the provision of foster and kinship care services and other official assessments. In the context where the child and/or the carer has physical and mental health needs, this increases risks and is not sustainable in the medium to long term.

Concerningly, children and young people are being put into unsafe placements which are unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term, further contribute to ongoing trauma, disruption and attachment forming for children and young people.

- **Recommendation 12:** Build Departmental capacity to undertake appropriate assessments prior to placements.

Increased supports for carers.

Greater support of both foster and kinship carers is needed. These roles can be challenging and overwhelming at times. Carers need to be provided with support to scaffold placements to avoid breakdowns and issues that can then result in complaints.

Foster and kinship carers can be better supported through:

- Clearer options for regular respite if needed should be identified.
- Ensuring holistic supports are wrapped around the foster or kin carers as needed.

Ongoing education and training are also needed for the foster and kinship carers, specific to the local context and their needs. This often does not occur, especially in remote communities.

Carers require more opportunities to build their expertise around parenting skills. Standards of care reviews on the carers can be very difficult for them without receiving this support from child safety and carer support agencies.

- **Recommendation 13:** Increase supports and services for kinship and foster carers.

Guiding best practice system approach

A number of guiding principles are recommended to improve complaints process and to improve broader services within the scope of the work of the Commission of Inquiry.

Listening to the child

The AASW commends the Commission for committing listening to young people from the outset.

"Whenever possible, the Commission is keen to engage with and listen carefully to the unmediated voices of young people from within the system and to learn of their experiences. Yesterday's meeting with these young people fortified in my mind the need to listen closely to their experiences, as they are able to give direct evidence about how the system works in practice from their unique point of view."

*"I propose to continue a dialogue with these young people and as many others as I can to ensure that I am informed of the right questions to ask from their perspective and so that their unique perspective is given real and genuine consideration in the crafting of any reforms that may ultimately be recommended."*⁶

Where possible, children and young people should be listened to through complaints processes and to design the best supports for them. The focus should always be in the best interests of the child. One member wrote:

"Listen to the children more – spend more time working alongside them, hearing what they have to say and empowering them in the process. Children's rights and their participation

⁶ https://www.childsafetyinquiry.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/847205/transcript-24-july-2025.pdf page

is often ignored. We as adults assume we know what is best for them and what they want, when we don't."

This approach is critical to social work practice and for designing responsive and empowering service systems. This is reflected in the AASW Code of Ethics:

"Social workers will promote the self-determination and autonomy of service users, actively seeking to enable them to make informed decisions on their own behalf."

In response to consultation for this submission, our members reiterated a number of guiding principles that we commend to the Commission:

- Adhere to the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Always act in best interest of the child.
- Focus on how to best support children and young people instead adopting blaming and punitive approaches.
- Foster multiagency collaboration so that the whole system can be holistic and totally child-centred.
- Adopt rights-based approaches.
- Use a public health model of child wellbeing and protection.

Conclusion

Our members are concerned about existing processes and procedures to keep children safe from harm. This is just one aspect of the systems that keep children and young people safe. Appropriate support services, training, qualified staff and assessments are also integral to ensuring the overall systems are working to meet the needs of children and young people.

The AASW looks forward to future opportunities to contribute to the work of the Commission of Inquiry.

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