

**Submission
No 8**

CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM

Name: Mrs Karen Craigie
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Submission

Enquiry into Child Protection and Social Services System

Submitted by

Karen Craigie

M.Comm, B.Mgt, Dip. Community Services Coordination, Cert IV Community Services Work

Further information – [REDACTED]

I write in my capacity as an experienced worker in the social services/child and family sector, a child protection specialist, the current and former lead of multiple DCJ-funded services, as a foster carer, as a parent and as a concerned community member.

I will summarise my submission in advance by expressing my deep concern for what is one of the most substantial examples of evidence-based failure of a system. I have broken this submission into sections to address key areas of this concern as they relate to; the inadequate support available for and provided to vulnerable families, gaps/lack of oversight/inefficiencies in funded service providers, the unintelligent and wasteful allocation of resources by agencies and organisations alike and the harm caused at all levels of the system to children, families, workers and the community.

I commend the process of this inquiry but also observe the many iterations of reform and inquiry in relation to the child protection system in the last decade alone that have resulted in little more than costly re-branding, excessive red-tape and much, much more of the very same. I am on the ground in this work, where you are not and I can assure you that whilst your findings may inform the system, the policy, process and the staff within this sector this work is immaterial to those families who need your insight the most. The top-down approach to problem-solving that such an inquiry offers is at the very heart of why the child protection and social services system continues to be problematic.

I provide my recommendations upfront, because there is always much that can be done to improve systems and I assure you that those in the services sector are committed to helping vulnerable clients and communities. Not only that but there can be no doubt that a great deal of excellent work is done and help given within and by this sector each day to the most vulnerable members of society. I will also add that I have been strongly impressed by the response to bushfires and COVID of all levels of government and all agencies in the social services sector. Let this be an example of what can be achieved when we abandon the rigidity and regulation of our everyday work in the social services and child protection sectors and start responding to community needs in real time. We have just come through 12 months of things being done with agility, impact and innovation. Whilst not perfect, this approach has been a brilliant testament to what this sector is capable of and the type of low-maintenance, fast-acting system that gets things done for those who need it most.

My recommendations as to how things can be improved are as follows;

- 1. Putting a rolling 5 to 10 year freeze on re-naming and re-branding government departments so that funding can be better allocated to the front lines where it is needed.**
- 2. Develop a commissioning system that has the ability to commence new contracting at any time to enable responsiveness and the emergence of new service sector organisations and approaches to service delivery.**
- 3. Provide funded services with the flexibility to use funding to design their own packages of client support, rather than commissioning specific activities. This would involve untying**

funding from 'pools' so that funding can be used in any way a client needs from emergency relief to housing to parenting programs and so forth.

4. Allocating funding to the client and not the agency to place the client at the centre of their social services experience and improve the performance of social services organisations.
5. Draw on international evidence and reduce reliance on local evidence which is often contradictory to international evidence. Examples of such include international evidence around closed adoption versus the local reliance on open adoption literature.
6. Develop data systems that work both ways, not just to collect client data for government use but to inform systems that social services can use to 'talk to' and coordinate with each other and that clients can use to navigate their own package of support services. This should include a centralised system of intake so that clients only need to provide their personal information once and service sector organisations are not bogged-down by the need to enter clients into systems such as the Data Exchange, when clients are in fact already in the system having been entered repeatedly by multiple social services organisations.
7. Allocate an advocate to every family in NSW. This role could act as the entry point for all families into the service sector. It can hold the client story, manage the purchase of services, and have an oversight and coordination function to connect families into relevant services as needed - similar to the way the NDIS works (but better!). This is not a case worker role. It can be initiated at birth by or as a replacement to the early childhood health nurse level and managed through the health system, and/or can then be passed on to a counterpart role based in every NSW school. The vast majority of families will never need their advocate but those that do will benefit from having a single entry point and one contact to support their journey through the service sector, whilst the system will save substantial money by reducing the current and future burden on the social sector.
8. Reduce focus on 'trauma-informed' care. This is an outdated concept that drives workers and carers to treat and pathologise children rather than responding to them as children.
9. Provide mandatory training for all new parents on parenting, child protection and navigating the service system.
10. Recruit child protection workers from under-utilised parent groups such as mothers returning to the workforce to ensure that those working in the child protection system actually have experience with children.
11. Allocate an external (to DCJ) caseworker or advocate to every parent involved with the child protection system to support them in navigating the system and performing the necessary work to increase their opportunity to have their children restored to them. Note that this recommendation would not be necessary if every family in NSW already had an advocate allocated to them.
12. Invest in a bottom-up funding framework that actively seeks out small and responsive community-level approaches to service delivery rather than pooling funds in large organisations with huge administrative funding leaks.
13. Allow children to drive child protection response. Wherever possible, seek children's advice as to what supports their parents may need in order to be better parents. Provide children with choices and options about which caseworkers and carers are let into their lives. Do not force children to participate if they don't want to.
14. Reduce the red tape that is everywhere.

My background as a subject matter expert

In my capacity as founder and Executive Director of Prosper (Project Australia) I oversee and run multiple social service programs covering emergency relief for families in hardship, support groups for

parents whose children have been removed into out of home care, early intervention work such as playgroups and parenting programs, primary prevention directly with children, parents and families, tailored programming for specific vulnerable cohorts such as refugees/asylum seekers, and the LGBTIQ+ community and all manner of community development work. As a part of this work my organisation was a founding consortium member of the DCJ-funded *My Forever Family* program which supports and recruits foster carers, and I worked directly with Adopt Change in planning, negotiating with DCJ, starting-up and operating this program in its first year. Prosper's work is funded by federal, state and local government as well as a broad range of foundations and businesses. This work reaches over 3000 NSW-based vulnerable families with children, each year. I preceded the last 6.5 years of this work, with running the Child Abuse Prevention Service (also for 6.5 years) – a national organisation which at the time ran a child protection helpline, child abuse prevention awareness, protective behaviours and targeted early intervention funded by DCJ.

I work all over Greater Sydney and NSW and in addition to managing my organisation and staff team, I deliver much of the direct client work myself. I have worked in partnership with over 500 community organisations and government agencies over my 13 year career in this sector. I have been engaged previously to provide sector subject matter expertise directly to treasury, Education and DCJ, as well as training to DCJ and other government department staff.

I have additionally served on the board of four community organisations. I have been the Chairperson of another. I am also currently an ordinary board member of Prosper (Project Australia) as well as its Executive Director.

I am a foster carer. My family became approved respite and emergency carers back in 2011 with DCJ (then FACS) and had in the vicinity of 30 placements of children with us whilst we were FACS carers, ranging in duration from 1 night to 9 months. We are now pre-adoptive carers with Barnardos and I am additionally the biological parent of a 13 year old.

Whilst I am happy for the information below to be on the public record, I have deliberately omitted the names of workers, clients, children and organisations for their privacy. However, I am able to provide these specifics directly and confidentially to the committee, should it be necessary and of value to the inquiry.

Inadequate support available for and provided to vulnerable families

It is widely understood that those who require the most assistance, are least likely to ask for it or have the means to access it. However, those who fall into the social services system either do so unwillingly because they are drawn in via the child protection route or get lost in a system in which many agencies attempt to do their part yet fail collectively to solve the problems of those in need because each agency is only able to service specific parts of the client story.

I can cite 22 cases just this year where clients have entered my organisation - Prosper (Project Australia) primarily for emergency relief or family support, which they have received. We have then identified a range of other issues such as homelessness, addiction, or disability and have referred clients on to other partner organisations only to have the clients circle back weeks or months down the track presenting with the same issues. Clients are accessing organisations, they are getting some help but as no one agency has oversight over these clients the broader issues are not getting resolved. Clients are simply receiving band-aid upon band-aid whilst their lives fall apart.

I am particularly worried about the many clients I see whose children are already in the child protection system. They are the most vulnerable parents in our state. Most of them have complex

challenges to face in their daily lives. They are set adrift and alone to navigate the system with no one on their side. They have no hope of improving their circumstances to get their child back. They are often given vague instructions and useless tasks to perform such as completing parenting programs. They feel hopeless and based on statistics I have seen about restorations, many have no chance of getting their children back. Setting parents up with redundant tasks to do when they have no hope of their children returning to them is both traumatic and cruel.

Further to this, social services systems are too complex for many to navigate. I am referring to the social services system in its entirety, the individual sectors within the social services system (including child protection) and the systems within the organisations that operate within the sector. This layering of systems is overwhelming. As a trained and knowledgeable community leader with years of experience in this system I still find it hard to know what to do with many clients. Their cases are so complex and they arrive at Prosper having already been through a variety of organisations. They have often experienced systems abuse and are trying to juggle multiple systems at once including legal, health, education and social services. They have collected multiple workers, programs, organisations and interventions over extended periods yet are seemingly even further away from resolving their issues than they were when they started their journey.

I observe that social services are coming into the client story far too late. Early identification of issues and intervention must be provided for all in a more holistic and over-arching way. We cannot wait for families to put their hands up for help. The barriers for them are endless – language, lack of transport, lack of money, chaotic lifestyle, disability, fear, mental illness, not knowing how, feeling overwhelmed, anger and resentment, mistrust. But the biggest barrier of all is the system itself.

Just before the pandemic hit NSW Customer Service contacted Prosper (Project Australia) to seek our assistance in coordinating a community consultation that drew in other departments such as Multicultural NSW to explore early childhood development. I was asked to source a number of culturally-diverse clients with children under the age of 3 to participate in the consultation and it was also requested of us that we provide a venue for the consultation. We were told (and passed on to prospective participants) that each client who participated would receive a \$75 voucher. I saw this as a wonderful opportunity for our clients whose voices are rarely heard, to have their say and a direct line to government. My clients were very enthused, even excited at the opportunity and I was able to sign up the requested number of families and secure the venue within a matter of an hour. The opposite can be said for the government's handling of this simple consultation. From cancelling and re-instating the consultation multiple times across the course of a week, to changing it from being an in-person consultation to a remote consultation, to changing the dollar amount of the voucher they would provide to each client. On the day of the consultation the agency staff arrived without so much as a bottle of water and I scurried around at the last minute purchasing refreshments for them and welcoming the parents whilst they fussed about with textas and butchers paper talking amongst themselves with their backs to us as the clients they requested entered the room with multiple children for whom this department had not bothered to organise childcare. The moment was a true summary of the over-complication, systemic idiocy, and inability of systems-level staff to meet and understand the clients they are actually employed to serve. Barrier upon barrier upon barrier to participation. Additionally, this government consultation cost my organisation hundreds of dollars as I funded not only the refreshments they didn't bother to provide, but the gap between the dollar value the department had promised the clients and what they actually supplied the clients. A board member of mine who happened to be visiting for the day provided child-care, and one of my staff members acted as a translator because despite my pre-warning, the language used by those conducting the consultation was far too advanced for the participating clients. This year, for me there has been no

single event that captured the very essence of the barriers between the system and the vulnerable than this mid-morning moment.

Lack of useable systems infrastructure

As an organisation, the inability to really help our clients stems from many things including the above-mentioned complexity of the system and is most frustrating. I have raised this at multiple interagency meetings and organisations are willing and able to work together. However, organisations have no power of client/system oversight. That is the responsibility of the government and we are still deeply lacking the systems to share information effectively. This is destructive at the best of times, fatal at the worst.

As an example, governments collect huge amounts of client and organisational information. I personally spend around 10 hours each and every week collecting client data and submitting both client data into the Data Exchange (DEX) and reporting data to various government funders. Yet these systems are not being used to support my clients, or my staff, or my organisation, or any other organisation that I am aware of.

If I could log onto a system and see who else is helping my clients, what other agencies are involved across health, education, etc and what type of help they are receiving I could identify any gaps in service provision, ensure I am not duplicating and invest Prosper's energy in meeting the gaps. If I could liaise directly with the partner organisations working with my client through a coordinated system then we could holistically address issues and work to bring in other agencies where issues were still outstanding.

The great irony is that these systems already exist but they are useless as we aren't all using them. Outdated systems such as Patchwork have been available for agencies to use for some years. However, they become redundant when government departments launch these systems for organisations to use and then refuse to use them themselves. We as organisations cannot do our work effectively if government departments are withholding from us then very information we are required to collect for them. Further, these systems so quickly evolve into such complex beasts that they cannot be used properly by anyone including the government departments that fund and create them. As an example, this survey feedback on the DCJ systems KIDS and ChildStory is in the public domain for all to see - https://psa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Open-Ended-Questions_ChildStory-Survey-2019.pdf.

In 2013/2014 I secured \$25 000 funding to customise Salesforce to be used as a client management system which remains effective to this day. It is unethical in the extreme that government departments continue to build and fund multimillion dollar systems that do not have the capacity to do what my \$25 000, 7 years old system can do. It is not hard and it is not expensive.

Moving on, the notion of collaboration and partnerships amongst social services organisations has become an outrageous excuse for government departments to shift responsibility onto the social services sector. Whenever resources are lacking or a gap is identified government departments within the social services sector push back on organisations to work in partnership to fill the holes and stretch resources even further. This works in the commercial sector but not in the social services sector. Organisations are funded within strict parameters and this has driven inflexibility within social services and a competitiveness where organisations fuss about irrelevant details such as who should be able to 'own' the registration of clients in collaborative projects. Social services organisations are well-intended and indeed workers feel overstretched and underfunded. But it is the tremendous inefficiency of the infrastructure that drives this. When you dig a bit deeper with many social services

employees the burnout, vicarious trauma and frustration is not about the clients. It actually comes from the complexity of the system and the inability of workers to draw on and draw out the system the resources and responses needed to do a good job for the client.

Unfortunately this aligns with the view the public has of charities. The public only observes the large charities with high profiles that eat millions of dollars, spend vast quantities on publicity campaigns and fundraising appeals and whilst employing armies of staff seem to draw on volunteers constantly. This is where much of the funding and resourcing ends up and this is a big problem for the social services sector because each of these large enterprises operates its own bureaucracy. For example, as a provider of emergency relief, I am constantly discouraged by and reporting to my national government funder the client complaints about trying to access these larger organisations. Clients don't get call backs, clients don't meet the eligibility criteria, there are too many rules or barriers to access for the clients to deal with. Vulnerable people cannot navigate large social service providers such as this. It is so very frustrating to watch smaller, lean social services organisations do so much good work with so many clients whilst some larger, high-profile organisations swallow up funding and resources yet barely manage to produce the same results as their smaller counter-parts.

I also have concerns about how departments such as NSW Health and Education integrate with the sector. I am presently working on an interagency project that seeks to connect schools with local service providers to improve how we all support families. I cannot believe how hard it is for community organisations to connect with public schools, let alone private schools. Again, the systems are just not there for that level of collaboration even though we are all dealing with the very same vulnerable families. I know schools desire the support from the services sector as I have personally experienced the demand for services from schools at each organisation I have worked at, and schools are the logical point from which the service sector and child protection can access families. Yet there is again a massive lack of facilitating infrastructure for this to happen.

Likewise in NSW Health, trying to establish contact with anyone in that department is a whole day's worth of effort. It should not be so hard. Prosper gets a dozen calls a week from NSW Health requiring support, why can I not pick up the phone and get the answers that I need for my client from NSW Health. It is really just too hard. I won't even draw in how impossible it is to break through other related systems such as the legal system. There is just no coordination. No matter what the rhetoric is, no matter what the policies say, please know that it is not actually happening on the ground. Clients must individually deal with each department and social services organisation as a separate entity. How truly difficult for them.

There is so much infrastructure at all levels but none of it is properly structured or equitably resourced such that it can be truly useful in benefitting vulnerable families and children.

Gaps, inefficiencies and lack of oversight in funded service providers

Outside of my own organisation, I have been on the board of a number of Australian-based community organisations. I relay three first-hand case studies to demonstrate some of the major issues within these organisations all funded to deliver social services in NSW and note that it would be statistically very improbable for this random selection of organisations to just happen to be the only three organisations with such issues. These problems are wide-spread. The Australian Charities and Not For Profits Commission is not picking up on these issues and funding continues to flow into these organisations and be frittered away on nonsense.

1. I joined the board of a DCJ-funded social service based in Western Sydney. Shortly after, 2 staff members approached me with a long list of concerns about the Manager of the service.

Very particularly they alleged that she was allocating staff hours and government funding to a personal project of her own that was not in any way aligned with what the organisation was being funded to deliver. This project was indeed a focus point of the Manager who had at the time been working in the organisation for almost 20 years by that stage. It was most definitely not part of the work the organisation was being funded to do. To cut a very long story short, the board launched an investigation which regrettably unearthed a hot-bed of conflict, accusation and poor accountancy during which the Manager was temporarily suspended and then resigned, and all but 2 staff members went on long-term stress leave. This dragged on for over 18 months and I regret to say that I did not have the stamina to see it through. But during this 18 months DCJ continued to fund the service whilst there were no staff in the organisation to do any work at all.

2. I previously worked for an organisation that had \$200 000 in DCJ TEI funding each year. This funded multiple workers and we saw hundreds of clients each year and delivered playgroups, case work, parenting programs and support groups. During my final year in the organisation this represented approximately half of the total income of the organisation and as the manager at the time I was earning \$65 000 and delivered much of the work myself. Prior to my leaving the organisation and against my advice and that of the staff team, the board decided to spend more than \$30 000 on consultancy work which was never utilised once I had left. The board then paid a recruitment agency over \$20 000 to recruit a new manager who they paid a salary of around \$150 000. So effectively in the year I left the organisation the entire TEI funding allocation was invested in administrative and recruitment activities and spent on a manager that did no client work whatsoever. Not an iota of the funding was allocated to actual TEI work and in the year that followed my leaving, this organisation systematically shut down its early intervention programming. The manager who replaced me was made redundant shortly after, but not before it came to light that he had been paying his girlfriend to provide supervision to the staff team, not before all the other staff left and not before most of the programs were closed down. Those programs remaining were provided to clients at a cost to the client.

This organisation still receives hundreds of thousands of dollars of government funding each year from DCJ. The board has had the same Chairperson for more than a decade. For a number of years the only members of the organisation were the board members themselves, no public AGM was held. I hold letters from former members, staff and volunteers expressing their grave concerns for the governance of the organisation under that board, and staff dissatisfaction at the use of funding, the poor governance and lack of anything being done saw an exodus of every qualified worker. I say again, this organisation is still being funded by DCJ. There is minimal work happening, and the only work that does happen is work that other organisations are being funded to deliver for free, yet this organisation is charging vulnerable members of the public to participate.

3. Another board experience I will mention was with a well-established child and family services organisation with a long history. I joined the board of this organisation at the same time as a new CEO joined. I was not three months into my board role before I was invited to a clandestine meeting where the board determined to oust the CEO, pinning a whole range of problems to her as she was kicked out the door. I was utterly shocked to observe that there had been no notice of there being any issues with this CEO. I could not understand why this person was already being removed from the organisation so soon after the board had paid tens of thousands of dollars for her to be brought into the business. It was a time of great disruption, funding wasted and low morale across a reasonably large business. In the end the

board settled on the recruitment of a staff member who was already employed in the organisation, leading me to question why they had not recruited this person in the first place. More government funding flying out the door in the process.

When I consider this, my view is that 100% of these locally-based organisations that I have been on the board of have had major issues relating to inefficiency, misuse of resources and lack of oversight. These sort of issues are treated very differently and with much more probity in the commercial world. It is genuinely shocking to observe first-hand how poorly community organisations delivering social services in NSW are operated and how little government agency funders appear to care about how their money is being spent. In my own organisation such gross inefficiencies would not be tolerated.

Unintelligent and wasteful allocation of resources by DCJ

One of the most frustrating client stories I have worked with this year was a mother who came to Prosper because she had been mandated by the court to attend a parenting program. During the course of intake I was made aware that lack of adequate housing was one of the primary drivers of this woman having her children removed from her and placed into the out of home care system.

These children had been removed and placed with relative carers who DCJ was assisting by paying for their housing! I qualified this with her caseworker to ensure I had my facts straight because it seemed so utterly nonsensical that DCJ would choose to remove the children, pay the workers to manage their case, tie up the courts, pay the carers and fund housing for the carers to look after the children rather than just support the birth mother to pay for adequate housing so that she could maintain living with her children in the first place. This is actually happening and the mother has been instructed to go and find adequate housing as a pathway to having her children restored. It is so backwards, so traumatising for the children and mother, so ridiculous. There are of course other presenting factors for this family but the housing was the trigger for the removal of the children. This is the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff and I can think of no more unintelligent a use of funding than this.

Prosper's case files are littered with examples of these toxic ironies and as previously mentioned I have particular concerns about how the birth parents of children in the child protection system are being treated.

At an organisational level, in my region of metro-Sydney I am the only Triple P Level 5 trained facilitator. My organisation – Prosper (Project Australia) is one of the few organisations that can provide evidence-based parenting programs across any and all areas in community languages such as Arabic and Mandarin. I know this because Prosper is in such demand for this work that we maintain a waiting list of larger organisations (e.g. Mission Australia) and Multiple local health districts waiting for us to do this work for them. The issue is that despite some DCJ-funded organisations not being able to do the work themselves, despite Prosper delivering targeted early intervention (TEI) work every week – playgroups, parenting programs, welfare support, protective behaviours and community development, and most ironically, despite DCJ caseworkers being the largest source of referrals into all of Prosper's programs, Prosper and a number of other organisations I am aware of, do not receive any funding from DCJ. Again, DCJ is funding organisations that are not able to perform the work themselves whilst not funding a number of organisations that actually do this work.

I have repeatedly mentioned this to multiple DCJ CPO's as a seemingly inefficient way to do business. They universally respond that there is no extra funding available to pay any other organisations. Even when an organisation in Sydney's inner west recently relinquished funding and Prosper and another organisation enquired about picking the funding up to deliver the very work, CPO's had no idea what

to do. The matter remains outstanding, capacity in the region has been reduced whilst active organisations are ready and willing to do this work with vulnerable clients.

Further to this, whilst claiming 'no funding available' from DCJ, I had the experience of participating in the negotiation for a multi-million dollar DCJ-funded program where a misinterpretation of an 'admin' line item of funding resulted in the DCJ Manager adding an additional \$160 000 to the budget of this program. This happened in real-time, during a negotiation conversation, instantaneously, with ease, no consultation whatsoever, decision made by one person on-the-spot and a chuckle all round. It is disturbing and wasteful indeed to watch the agency drop an additional \$160 000 for administration on an already multi-million dollar program because the negotiators couldn't accurately interpret the budget, whilst hearing DCJ simultaneously claiming there is no money available for organisations working with clients on the front lines. Having additionally just seen the funding response to COVID by the state government it is even more clear that this is an all-out lie. There needs to be a better party line fed to government staff if they are to remain believable when trying to fob-off those of us on the front lines. This is public money. It is disgraceful.

Harm caused at all levels of the system to children, families, workers and the community

There is nothing like becoming a client within this system to show you how truly dysfunctional it can be.

As mentioned, my family is a foster caring family. In 2016, a child in my care disclosed that they had been abused by not one but two of the foster children who had stayed with us previously. For anonymity I will label the children 'Victim', 'Perpetrator 1' and 'Perpetrator 2'.

I will not discuss the details of the children, however I will indicate that both perpetrators were very troubled, young foster boys (one was 8, and one was 9). They were both a year or two older than the victim. Both perpetrators displayed concerning behaviours to the other children in my home, including my own biological child, the younger, non-verbal sister of one of the perpetrators and other foster children. Perpetrator 2 was suspended from school repeatedly for violent outbursts and Perpetrator 1 arrived at our home with a warning to keep an eye on his behaviour towards his younger sister.

As a child protection specialist I immediately identified multiple concerning issues and sought support within the child protection system for both perpetrators from their caseworkers (who had nothing to do with each other and were from 2 different DCJ offices). I notified my own caseworker that I had removed my own biological child from the home and sent him to his grandmother's house as I did not feel he was safe with Perpetrator 2. I repeatedly requested in writing intervention for Perpetrator 1 after hearing and seeing him exhibit sexualised behaviour, and I made multiple requests that Perpetrator 2 be removed from my home as quickly as possible. Despite these multiple requests for support for the children and reporting of problematic behaviours, DCJ did nothing but leave the children at my home. At this time DCJ were in fact contacting my family to see if we would be able to take on additional foster children as well!

It was not until months after both perpetrators had left my home that the victim disclosed the abuse. I reported to my caseworker and this triggered my family's 2 year exhausting, awful and ultimately fruitless journey through the child protection system.

Our DCJ caseworker had always been tremendously supportive and continued to be. However, dealing with DCJ beyond this was an absolute nightmare. As someone who is educated, speaks English, communicates well and works in the sector I was almost driven to desperation. I will not bore you with

the tedium but summarise some of the key happenings for your consideration as an example of a first hand account of my experience dealing with the child protection and social services system...

- Requesting and then having to wait 2 whole years for a meeting with Michael Coultts-Trotter, which we did get in the end. However, he mentioned at our meeting that he had only been notified of the request for the meeting some few weeks earlier despite us having made this request almost 2 years prior.
- Requests for a meeting with the minister (Hazard at the time), taking so long to process that he had left and the new minister (Goward) had come in. Starting the request again, only to have it refused months later. This entire process again taking over 2 years. I have serious doubts whether the request was passed on by any of the multiple DCJ staff who were involved in our experience.
- Nobody at DCJ telling us about Victims Services. My family had to do our own research to advocate on behalf of the victim and secure counselling and recognition payments for them.
- Waiting for over 12 months just for an internal DCJ investigation to begin on the matter.
- Receiving the results of this investigation which DCJ did on itself (!) which unsurprisingly concluded that despite my multiple reports of concerning behaviour of both perpetrators and requests for support, DCJ could not have predicted that the victim would be harmed. Deeply upsetting as this was the very thing that I was predicting with my verbal and written requests to DCJ for support.
- Being interviewed repeatedly by a random assortment of DCJ workers some of whom came into our home only once and then we never saw again. To this day I have no idea how many different DCJ workers are holding information on this very upsetting story.
- Being made aware that Perpetrator 1 and Perpetrator 2 were still floating around and had access to other children, despite DCJ agreeing that these two boys placed other children at risk of significant harm.
- Being aware of at least one child who was not in the child protection system but who was brought into the child protection system because of the actions of DCJ itself in placing unsafe children in my home and not providing the support requested when significant risk was identified.

Against a backdrop of this traumatic experience our family endured another trauma at the hands of DCJ. We had expressed our interest in transferring from emergency care to long-term/adoption. There was a ban on agency transfers of carers at this time. DCJ had contacted us about placing a child with us permanently and found us our beautiful foster daughter (who I will call Ali). Ali was two weeks past her 3rd birthday when she arrived at our home. She had already been removed from her parents and through a process of family finding had been placed into the care of her aunt who allowed her parents to have unauthorised contact with her, so she was removed from her Aunt and placed with a temporary foster carer whilst we finished up another short term foster care placement we were doing. We were an instant family. Ali fit in beautifully, she was calling me mum within 3 months and DCJ spoke to us repeatedly about the adoption process. 9 months passed with everything ticking along as normal family life. We were awaiting an order of permanent care and had contact from Ali's advocate at court. However in the same week that I had to report the afore-mentioned abuse and details of victim and perpetrators to DCJ, we were contacted by DCJ to notify us that totally out of the blue Ali's Uncle was being granted permanent care of her. This was family that DCJ had not managed to present or even mention to us at any point in the preceding 9 months. Ali was terrified of her uncle and cried

endlessly when we broke the news to her that she would be leaving. Ali had never spent so much as a night with her Uncle yet had lived almost a third of her entire life with us.

Heart-breaking does not begin to cover the experience of having to say goodbye to that little girl. Made worse by the fact that DCJ had been working with all of us towards permanent care, compounded by DCJ's inability to find this family at any point in the 9 months before that moment, tinged with an even more awful that we were dealing with the dual devastation of discovering the harm caused by foster children in my own home when support had been repeatedly requested from DCJ. I do not have the words to explain how devastating that year was for me as a worker, as a foster parent, for my family, for my own biological child, for my foster children. Our involvement with the social services and child protection system was so traumatic, so upsetting, so deeply frustrating and anger-invoking. The systems proved to be unrelenting and unforgiving and were it not for our sheer determination and my insider knowledge of the sector I do not believe we would have had any hope at all of achieving any of the very small wins that we derived from our years in the system. But we had resources, time and knowledge. Most families dealing with child protection and social services do not. They are wholly ruined by these systems. Words can't adequately express the pain I see in the eyes of so many families. Whether they are drug-impacted, mentally-ill mothers of children in the child protection system, whether they are asylum seekers at the end of their ability to cope with how hard life actually is for them in Australia, whether they are members of the LGBTIQ+ community who have experienced domestic violence, whether they are homeless teenagers struggling to find emergency accommodation that will take them along with their pets, they are all so close to not having the strength to get up in the morning and keep trying. Everything is unnaturally complicated where it needn't be. COVID has made the hardship even worse.

The social services sector and child protection system does not need more people, or more money, or more resources. It simply needs all of the parts to work in a more intelligent way and with a prevention focus. I understand that this is far easier said than done. However I deem from this inquiry there is a willingness to improve and I genuinely hope that you will consider my account as a client, as a worker, as a carer in this system, and as a taxpayer who is frankly outraged at how much money is wasted to do work that I assure you can be done more effectively and at a fraction of the cost because I myself am doing it.

There is so much good to be done and I again reiterate that there has been such a massive advancement in the way that the social services sector responds across the board in this sector because of COVID. Let's keep that momentum going for the sake of all of us.

Thanks for reading!