



## **Submission from**

The Australian Association of Social Workers

# **To the Australian Government relating to the consultation paper and Terms of Reference**

for the

# **Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse**

November 2012

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## Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) thanks the Australian Government for the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper relating to this important Royal Commission. In the brief time available, the AASW has canvassed views by social workers and would like to provide the contributions to this important matter that are outlined below.

The AASW has almost 7000 members and is the representative body for the profession of social work in Australia. In the appendix to this submission the AASW provides further information about the profession of social work in the Australian community.

The AASW is also a member and strong supporter and contributor to Families Australia. The AASW would like to indicate our support for their submission and advocacy on the matter of this Royal Commission. Families Australia is a national independent, peak, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to promoting the needs and interests of families. It is funded by its 440 member organisations and the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

## Submission

The AASW would like to bring the following matters to the Government's attention:

1. The AASW has a view that the Royal Commission should be strongly independent, particularly from the institutions or their representatives into which it is likely to be inquiring, this particularly relates to independence from Church institutions. This will be particularly relevant to the appointment of Commissioners, the staff and advisors to the Commission.
2. The AASW believes that there should be a number of Commissioners with a diversity of skill and experience to enable the Commission to approach the inquiry from alternative perspectives, to undertake work in different areas of concern and to be able to take evidence in different locations simultaneously. A Commissioner with experience in child protection who is independent from church or government would be beneficial to the integrity of the Commission.
3. The AASW is also of the view that the Government should consider a mix of professional discipline backgrounds in appointing staff and advisors. It is our view that it would not serve the Governments broad objectives if the Commissioners and staff were only from a legal background.
4. The AASW believes that social welfare professionals should be invited to be key contributors to the evidence in the Commissions deliberations. Professional training and adherence to professional knowledge and a values and ethical base will give strength to the evidence provided by witnesses to the Commission from professional groups such as professional social workers (eligible to be members of the AASW, see Appendix).
5. In relation to the evidence provided, the AASW requests that the Commission give every opportunity to the survivors and their families to give lived experience evidence.

6. The inquiry should be about system abuse not just abuse relating to institutions with bricks and mortar, eg community care arrangements.
7. It will be vital that the Commissioners work closely with the media to ensure that reporting of proceedings will not be negative and destructive. Reporting should be factual but sensitive to possible stigma and assertion and should avoid damaging reporting of victims statements. Many vulnerable people will be involved in the proceedings and the Commission should seek advice as to how evidence should be reported to avoid adverse affects on people giving evidence and those in the community who might be vulnerable.
8. The Commission should be encouraged to accept evidence from and about institutions other than church institutions eg particularly mental health institutions, criminal and juvenile justice centres. Perhaps different Commissioners could be appointed to different institutional settings.
9. The Commission should consider releasing sectional reports during the proceedings in an attempt to spread the affect of the findings on the community.
10. In publishing the final reports, every attempt should be made to ensure that victims do not experience 're-abuse'.
11. Very early in the Commissioner's work, a strategy to engage State Government departments and child protection services will be required. This will be to ensure that evidence can be attained where necessary from other related reviews, inquiries or judicial procedures. An issue which will inevitably emerge and will need careful consideration is 'the adequacy of child projection authorities to respond to allegations over the years'.
12. The Commission will have to be alert to possible collusion between witnesses when evidence appears negative toward one institution or the other.
13. The AASW is also aware that many ethical and well run institutions provide important ongoing care in the area of children's services. The Government should work with the Commissioners to ensure that a strategy is implemented in order not to damage, discredit or 'bring down' existing service provider organisations who may be vital to ongoing care arrangements.
14. It will also be important to protect individuals from experiencing disabling psychological affects relating to guilt as a result of them believing that, unwittingly, they were complicit in abusing circumstances.
15. It will also be important to ensure that the Commission is funded to employ professional counsellors to assist witnesses or anyone who might be adversely affected by their experience interacting with the Commission. Referral to an adequately resourced system of counselling organisations in the community will be an important resource for Commission staff.
16. The Commission will have to take a view early in the proceedings in relation to the matter of compensation and redress.

17. The AASW is aware that the scope and dimension of this Royal Commission will require time. However, the AASW believe that the Commission should be asked to report within a time frame of say 3 to 5 years.

An overall remark from this profession is that the Commission should be forward looking.

Question One: How should a contemporary society respond in the future to institutional care of children (systems as well as bricks and mortar)?

Question Two: What safe guards should be put in place to minimise the risks in future arrangements for state sanctioned care of children?

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to these important Royal Commission deliberations.

Submitted for and on behalf of  
the Australian Association of Social Workers Ltd



Glenys Wilkinson  
Chief Executive Officer

# Appendix

## **The Social Work Platform**

Professional Social Workers are graduates of a four year undergraduate social work university program or a post graduate social work masters program from a university accredited by the AASW.

The social work profession is committed to maximising the well being of individuals, families and the community in socially inclusive communities, which emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity. The social work profession is committed to the pursuit of social justice, the enhancement of the quality of life and the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society.

1. In carrying out their professional tasks and duties, social workers strive to act in ways that give equal priority to respect for human dignity and worth. This commitment is demonstrated through service to humanity, integrity and competence, which characterise professional social work practice.
2. The AASW is the only national organisation for social workers in Australia. Social Workers are involved in the delivery of a range of community services including health, family support, and child welfare, income support, in the public, private and not for profit sectors. Social Workers work in the government and non government sectors providing child focussed services in child protection, out of home care, early intervention, policy and management.
3. Professional social work practice is underpinned by a code of ethics which emphasises principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights, including the right to freedom from abuse, intimidation and terror. Social work also takes a rights-based approach, consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).
4. The objectives of the AASW are to pursue social justice, promote the public and professional recognition of social work, set education standards and promote lifelong learning, improve practice standards, and contribute to development of knowledge and research.

## **Role of Social Workers**

Significant numbers of AASW members work in the child protection field in a range of roles including direct case work, management, policy and a variety of early intervention roles. Social workers are recognised throughout the world as the core professional group in child protection policy, management and practice.