

I understand that the Committee is familiar with PeakCare’s submission. I will confine my opening statement therefore to a reiteration of PeakCare’s major concerns about the Bill.

Within our submission, PeakCare noted 2013-14 data reported by the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (2015) about child protection investigations by the source of the notifications. This data showed that, across Australia, 1.1% of investigations were undertaken following reports by ‘child care personnel’. In Queensland, child care personnel were identified as the notifier in relation to around 1.1% of investigations. In New South Wales and Victoria, the two largest jurisdictions and ones in which Early Childhood Education and Care sector workers are mandated reporters, child care personnel were identified as the notifier in 1.5% and 0.9% of investigations respectively.

The Committee’s attention is drawn to updated data for 2014-15 recently released by the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare. The national figure of 1.1% of investigations being undertaken following reports by child care personnel has remained the same. In relation to Queensland, the figure fell from 1.1% to 0.7%. In relation to NSW where Early Childhood Education and Care sector workers are mandated reporters, the figure fell very slightly from 1.5% to 1.4% and in Victoria, where Early Childhood Education and Care sector workers are also mandated reporters, there was a decrease from 0.9% to 0.6%. The updated data continues to suggest that reporting by Queensland’s Early Childhood Education and Care sector remains comparable to other jurisdictions irrespective of differences that apply across the states in relation to mandatory reporting provisions.

Within PeakCare’s submission to the Committee, we acknowledge that available literature about mandating reporting obligations for particular professions and the effectiveness of mandatory reporting in protecting children is relatively limited. We do make reference to some literature however and highlight both the perceived advantages and disadvantages of mandatory reporting highlighted in this literature. In particular we note identified benefits of mandatory reporting such as government signalling that it takes child abuse seriously, the raising of awareness about how to tackle child abuse, the encouragement mandatory reporting provides to notifiers to make early reports, and an increase in reports being received by child protection agencies.

Our submission also highlights identified disadvantages including the over-burdening of child protection agencies with an ‘over-reporting’ of concerns that do not meet the threshold for undertaking an investigation and resources being directed to processing reports and undertaking often unnecessary investigations in preference to constructive engagement and earlier voluntary interventions with children and families, an adverse impact on self-referrals for help, and a dynamic of professionals ‘passing the buck’ once they have fulfilled their responsibilities to report in preference to sharing responsibility for responding to the challenges that families and children face.

As highlighted within our submission, PeakCare is especially concerned about the inadvertent effects of the proposed extension of mandatory reporting in ‘driving away’ some families from allowing their children to access Early Childhood Education and Care due to a fear of being reported. This is a concern held in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families due to the history of distrust that contributes to the under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early education and their over-representation within the child protection system. As noted within

PeakCare's submission, almost 100% of non-Indigenous Queensland children are enrolled in an Early Childhood Education and Care program, compared to only 65% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. PeakCare holds similar concerns in relation to children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, those whose parents have a disability, and those whose families have or are experiencing domestic and family violence

PeakCare's submission notes and it is understood that submissions by other organisations have also highlighted, the high costs of training, insurance, staff recruitment and other human resource management activities, and report writing that would accompany the introduction of the proposed expansion of mandatory reporting which may end up needing to be 'passed onto customers'.

Finally, I wish to highlight concerns raised by PeakCare within our submission about the timeliness of the Bill. PeakCare recognises there are legitimate issues to be raised on each side of the mandatory reporting argument and there is only a small amount of guidance to be found within the literature that provides a clear way forward. It is important to note however that amendments to the mandatory reporting obligations of designated professionals were only recently reviewed, amended and consolidated under the *Child Protection Act 1999*. That Act is currently subject to a significant review, which makes the timing of these deliberations to expand mandatory reporting obligations ill-advised.

The Queensland Government has made and is continuing to make substantial changes to Queensland's child protection system in response to recommendations from the Carmody Inquiry, including a significant investment in establishing the Family and Child Connect program. Many of these changes are based on a notion of enabling earlier and easier access by families to the 'right services at the right time' and by the right service provider and 'un-burdening' Child Safety Service Centres from the demands of processing un-warranted reports. PeakCare's concern is that it is still relatively 'early days' in relation to implementing the 'ten year roadmap' recommended by the Carmody Inquiry. PeakCare's concern is that expansion of mandatory reporting laws to the Early Childhood and Education sector may be counter-productive to the planned changes to Queensland's child and family sector or, at the least, are being prematurely considered in the absence of sufficient time having been given to evaluating the impact of the current program of reforms on achieving improved outcomes for Queensland children and families.

PeakCare's conclusion, at this stage, is that to protect children from harm, the real issue is not about the expansion of mandatory reporting laws to the Early Childhood and Education sector. The real issues are much more about providing initial and ongoing support, resourcing, training and education to Early Childhood Education and Care workers, and fostering collaborative relationships between the Early Childhood Education and Care sector, Child Safety, family support services and other helping agencies. What is needed is more awareness-raising, staff training, support and supervision Early Childhood Education and Care workers to enable full appreciation of the need to raise concerns with parents and carers and how to do this effectively, rather than mandatory reporting to the statutory child protection agency.

Thank you for the opportunity to present PeakCare's concerns to the Committee.