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Child Protection Systems:

An international comparison of “good practice examples” of five countries (Australia, Germany, Finland, Sweden, United Kingdom) with recommendations for Switzerland

Summary of key recommendations



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The Swiss Project Fund for Child Protection identifies and supports evidence-based prevention and training projects with measurable results. The association funds research projects targeted at closing knowledge gaps in the field of prevention. By actively disseminating research results and findings, the association intends to establish a knowledge network which adds value to all stakeholders in the field of child protection.

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In the original conceptualisation of this project we identified two primary aims; first to examine current evidence for the effective delivery of child protection services from countries whose levels of economic and social development is comparable to that of Switzerland; and second, to identify international comparisons of good practice to be evaluated with respect to the validity of their application in Switzerland. We have addressed these aims by comparing child protection practices across countries, providing analysis and making recommendations. The analyses and recommendations provided here are, in part, drawn from those provided in the five country case studies and from the collective secondary analyses carried out by the report authors at a workshop convened in Berne. These findings have been subject to further analysis and evaluation with respect to their application in a Swiss context by a panel comprising experts drawn from the legal, academic and practice fields in Switzerland. We are indebted to Andrea Hauri, Marco Zingaro, Christian Nanchen, Stefan Blülle, Peter Voll, Stefan Schnurr and Judith Wytenbach for their work in this regard. The advice received by the expert panel has informed a number of changes within this, the final report, reflecting the feasibility of implementing the recommendations in the Swiss context. Our intention is to provide a principled and pragmatic account of what constitutes an effective, modern child protection system with recommendations for implementation in Switzerland. Our intention is not to set out exactly how such recommendations might be implemented; this later task, the implementation phase, being a matter for all those concerned with respect to legal, policy and practice dimensions of child protection in Switzerland.

In our overview report we identify the key stimuli for the development of child protection systems, namely; the prevalence and effects of child maltreatment (the scientific imperative), the need for investment in children (the economic imperative), children's rights (the legal imperative) and inter-country comparison of child well-being (the moral imperative). We further demonstrate that the purposes of modern child protection systems may be viewed as trying to achieve two things; intervening in situations where a crisis has already occurred using a responsive emergency system, and identifying those populations most at risk and providing preventative services to them in order that such emergency responses will not be required. Both types of response are necessary and contribute to the protection of children. Most children and families will benefit from universal and targeted services designed to improve child welfare outcomes and protect against the effects of adversities. However, a robust and effective specialist child protection service is also necessary to ensure that those most vulnerable children in society receive immediate and effective protection. A key function of central government is to create a balanced set of legislation and policies, which whilst subject to local variation, reflect informed and agreed principles and standards, with clear lines of governance and authority. Our recommendations therefore reflect such standards and ideals.

Recommendation 1 – National Standing Committee

We recommend the establishment of a national standing committee, representing all Canton governments, to review Swiss Federal and Cantonal laws and policies with the objective of producing a National Framework for Child Protection (similar to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children where there are comparable state and Confederation government arrangements). This would have the effect of creating a universally agreed set of principles to inform Canton law and service provision. To inform the work of the Standing Committee the governments of Cantons should review their current service provision from universal through to targeted levels (see recommendation 9) to ensure a planned continuum of services.

Recommendation 2 – Child Welfare Boards

We recommend the establishment of a 'Child Welfare Board' in each Canton. The membership would comprise all organisations, non- governmental and private providers of services within the Canton. As well as implementing the policies to meet the aims of the anticipated National Framework for Child Protection, they would have a range of responsibilities concerned with developing communication protocols between agencies and auditing services within the Canton at universal, targeted and specialist levels to identify gaps in provision and make plans to meet these. We would anticipate that some provision of highly specialist services would be required which would require cross Canton support and commissioning arrangements, for example, the provision of specialised therapeutic services for children who have suffered sexual abuse. In these cases special arrangements would be required to create clear lines of governance and accountability which would involve the Child Welfare Boards and Canton governments in co-operative arrangements.

Recommendation 3 – Social Work Teams

There should be teams of professionally qualified social workers employed in each Canton to carry out the functions with respect to child protection at specialist level and requirements as determined by the Swiss Civil Code, Articles 307 to 317. They should be primarily responsible for carrying out assessment of families where maltreatment is indicated and/or there are needs for therapeutic or preventative services and convening Case Planning Meetings with professionals in order to develop intervention and service plans (see recommendation 4).

Recommendation 4 – Case Planning Meetings

A system of interdisciplinary Case Planning Meetings should be set up in each Canton. Reflecting some of the strengths of the child protection case conference system operational in the UK, these meetings should involve all those professionals working with families where there are considered to be child protection issues. In keeping with international best practice such child protection issues should be understood in the broad sense, encompassing situations where there are immediate risks to a child but also those where the range of adversities faced by the child are predictive of poor outcomes. In either case the objective should be the production of a multi-disciplinary service plan whose effectiveness in protecting children and enhancing their well-being may be assessed in subsequent review meetings. It is important that the principle of sharing information in the best interests of the child is not hampered by considerations of client confidentiality.

Recommendation 5 – Professional Education in Child Protection

There is an opportunity in Switzerland to build an effective interprofessional child protection system. Whilst mandatory laws may help in some circumstances to achieve this, we would recommend that effort be placed on creating a system of professional education within universities wherein unidisciplinary training concerning child protection is a mandatory part of the curriculum at undergraduate level for all professionals working with children or families and that multidisciplinary training is made normative for the same professionals, at postgraduate level. In these ways all professionals would have basic knowledge of child protection issues and see the effective protection of children as a collective responsibility. This would require the development of course material for undergraduate and postgraduate courses by universities.

Recommendation 6 – Promotion of Social Work

Universities should ensure that selection procedures for social work students are robust; requiring high entry grades and interviews to ensure that the best possible candidates are selected. As part of the National Framework for Child Protection (see recommendation 2), there should be a strategy for the promotion of social work as a demanding, challenging and rewarding career. Canton governments should ensure that social workers in their employment are offered salaries and career structures reflective of the complex and socially important demands of their profession.

Recommendation 7 – Family Participation

We recommend that Switzerland follow international best practice standards by having families attend and share in decision making processes at multidisciplinary Case Planning Meetings (see recommendation 4). Care should be taken to systematically involve parents and children (who may have a different perspective from their parents) in all assessment and decision making processes. This should be enshrined in all guidance and assessment tools developed for the use of social workers and other professionals (see recommendations 9 and 10). Where Guardianship is being considered with respect to a child then special rights of representation and appeal procedures should be standardised within the proposed Framework for Child Protection in Switzerland.

Recommendation 8 – Audit of Services

The development of a continuum of children's services requires an audit to provide a description of services and their locations already available across Switzerland at universal, targeted and specialist levels. This would provide the basis for an analysis of need at Canton level where gaps in service could be identified and steps taken to develop services against priorities informed by the work of Canton Child Welfare Boards (see recommendation 2). Such audits could be aggregated across the country to inform the development of the National Framework for Child Protection (see recommendation 1).

Recommendation 9 – Child Protection Guidance

We recommend that guidance is commissioned by the national standing committee (see recommendation 1) to enable social workers and other professionals to effectively undertake their work in ways which are reflective of Federal and Canton laws and policies and are informed by international research evidence on what constitutes best practice in relation to work with families and children. The guidance should be 'user friendly' and not overly prescriptive.

Recommendation 10 – Common and Specialist Assessment

We recommend that a two-tier assessment framework should be commissioned by the national standing committee (see recommendation 1) and operationalised by Canton Child Welfare Boards (see recommendation 2); the first common tier for all professionals working with children and the second specialist tier for social workers. This assessment framework should reflect international best practice in being ecologically based and evidence informed.

Recommendation 11 – Audit of Methods

The use of a range of methods by social workers has become normative in child protection systems. It is important that, where possible, evidence based methods reflecting client needs are used and should include both support services and therapeutic interventions. Current methods used in Switzerland should be audited against assessed levels of need at Canton level (see recommendation 9) with a view to identifying any gaps in provision. Such gaps, if found, should then inform the training and service implementation strategies of the proposed Child Welfare Boards (see recommendation 2).

Recommendation 12 – Review of State Care

We recommend that as part of the development of a Swiss National Framework for Child Protection (see recommendation 1) a review of state care is commissioned by the national standing committee and implemented through the Child Welfare Boards in their respective Cantons (see recommendation 2).

Recommendation 13 – Vetting and Barring System

In line with best practice across the countries we would reinforce the necessity to have good vetting and barring schemes in place to ensure that those working with children, whether in residential establishments or in the community, do not have a record of criminal offences against children. We would recommend that such information be collated at Federal level and be available to Cantons, as those seeking to work with children across Switzerland should be subject to the same regulatory framework.

Recommendation 14 – Output and Outcome Measures

As part of a National Framework for Child Protection in Switzerland (see recommendation 1) it would be important to agree upon a range of output and outcome measures for the system. The latter should not only make quantitative data available but also include qualitative data (e.g. the recording of children's subjective experiences and their evaluation of services). The establishment of such national data requires that each child is given an individual signifier on receipt of services to permit tracking through the system over time to enable aggregation of data and discernment of trajectories and patterns to further inform service planning and development at Canton level (see recommendation 2) and interdisciplinary interventions at case level.

Child protection systems are necessary because we are now aware of the range of harms caused to children if they are subject to a number of adversities, including the experience of child maltreatment. In developing and renewing its child protection system Switzerland is uniquely placed to benefit from an analysis of contemporary child protection systems across five countries. The major finding of our work is that the lessons to be learnt from these countries, both positive and negative, are remarkably consistent and coherent. We considered at the start of this project that there would be great difficulty in deducing clear lessons because of problems in creating points of comparability. Generally speaking, however, a remarkable degree of consensus has emerged with regard to what constitutes 'best practice' in contemporary child protection systems. The 14 recommendations we have made represent what any of the research team would wish for their own countries, yet none of our countries bear all these features.

We realise, of course, that much of what we have recommended is reflected in current developments within Switzerland. As is the case in the other countries in our report, Swiss authorities demonstrate a concern to address the economic and social conditions which may be seen to impact upon the health and wellbeing of children and young people. They are also concerned with identifying those populations most at risk of failing to achieve good standards of health and wellbeing and targeting these for special interventions of a preventative nature, whilst ensuring immediate protection of individuals where this is necessary.

We have sought to develop a series of recommendations which move from the foundational level, involving issues of governance, through intermediate level, representing interrelated features, to specialist level, identifying the key delivery of services. We have collated these recommendations in the table below and they are further expressed in the diagram following. Two things will be apparent, first the recommendations build one upon the other and they are interlocking. This is the nature of contemporary child protection systems. It is therefore difficult to unpick one without the rest falling down. Second, they collectively speak to a next phase; implementation across a number of work streams. That will be the next challenge.

Foundation Level – Governance Features of Contemporary Child Protection Systems
<p>Recommendation 1 – A national standing committee at Federal level to produce a National Framework for Child Protection to inform development of Canton law and service planning.</p> <p>Recommendation 2 – Cantons retain legal responsibility for child protection services but these are planned and delivered with voluntary and private providers in Child Welfare Boards.</p>
Intermediate Level – Interrelated Features of Contemporary Child Protection Systems

Recommendation 3 – Teams of social workers employed in each Canton to discharge legal responsibilities associated with a child protection service at specialist level.

Recommendation 4 – Interdisciplinary Case Planning Meeting set up in each Canton to ensure effective planning to meet needs and ensure protection at case level.

Recommendation 5 – Universities establish undergraduate and postgraduate training in child protection for professionals.

Recommendation 6 –Universities to review standards for admission to social work degree programmes.

Recommendation 7 – Promotion of partnership; parents to attend Case Planning Meetings and children’s rights to representation and appeal in decisions involving them become standardised.

Advanced Level – Service Delivery Features of Contemporary Child Protection Systems

Recommendation 8 – Development of a continuum of children’s services based on the Public Health Model to inform the development of the National Framework for Child Protection.

Recommendation 9 – Development of practice guidance for social workers incorporating legislation and research informed ‘best practice’.

Recommendation 10 – Introduction of a two tier assessment framework at specialist level for social workers and common level for other professionals.

Recommendation 11 – Audit of current intervention methods employed by social workers to inform the work of the Child Welfare Boards in developing training and implementation strategies.

Recommendation 12 – Audit of state care to inform development of National Framework for Child Protection and work of Child Welfare Boards.

Recommendation 13 – Establish a national vetting and barring scheme for those working with children.

Recommendation 14 – Set up national data system to track both system outputs and child outcomes as part of National Framework for Child Protection and to inform the work of Child Welfare Boards.



