

Towards a futures strategy for the Victorian community services sector: “A knowledge perspective”

Abstract

This paper uses the idea of a “knowledge lens” as a means of contributing to the current thinking about a futures strategy for the Victorian Community Services Sector. In the first part of the paper there is a specific focus on one particular aspect of the sector - namely those organisations involved in providing support services to vulnerable children, young people and families. The origins and implementation of the current reforms to the Child Protection System are discussed using this “knowledge perspective” to frame the discussion. It is highlighted that careful and on-going monitoring of the inter-related service systems that make up the Child Protection System will be required. The objective would be to identify emergent patterns of behaviour across the different sub-systems as adjustments are made in response to recent reform initiatives. To achieve the objectives of the new legislation, positive patterns should be amplified and negative ones dampened down.

If there is agreement about the merit of treating the CPS as a complex adaptive system as is suggested in this paper, this may require the development of new ways of understanding the nature of partnership between the Government and the sector. Such an approach may be at the heart of securing on-going sustainability, diversity and responsiveness of the different sub-systems that support vulnerable children, young people and families.

In the second part of the paper, this analysis is used to draw out some guiding principles with respect to the future of the Community Services Sector as a whole. With the recent establishment of a VCOSS auspiced futures taskforce for the sector, it is timely to give such matters consideration.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of all those involved in conceiving and galvanizing the dual roles of the Alfred Felton Chair in Child and Family Welfare (Professor Cathy Humphreys) and “knowledge broker” position within the Child and Family Welfare Sector. We are grateful to the Alfred Felton Trust and the Telstra Foundation for funding both positions for five and three years respectively.

INTRODUCTION

There are three categories of services that are available for children, young people and families – namely universal, secondary and tertiary services as described in Figure 1. The goal of primary services is to provide support and education for children and families before problems arise. Secondary service offer programs targeted at “at risk” populations to identify and reduce the personal and social stresses on parents and children which can lead to family breakdown and/or child abuse. Tertiary services are for children and young people either on the basis of the statutory powers of the Children’s Court and DHS Child Protection Service or on a voluntary basis (adapted from Office for Children, 2007).

There are different organisational and sector responsibilities for the delivery of each of these services. Primary or universal services are accessible by everyone. Secondary and non-statutory tertiary services form part of Child and Family Services (hereafter CFS). The statutory tertiary services are defined by legal status of Children as determined by the Statutory Child Protection Service (hereafter S-CPS), but services can be delivered by S-CPS and or the CFS.

CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM			
PS	CFS		S-CPS
<p>PRIMARY SERVICES (Ante-natal service; maternal and child health etc)</p>	<p>SECONDARY SERVICES (In Family support, counselling, respite care, parenting and self help groups etc)</p>	<p>NON-STATUTORY TERTIARY SERVICES (Placement services for children unable to live at home)</p>	<p>STATUTORY TERTIARY SERVICES (Statutory Child Protection Service in response to notifications)</p>

Figure 1. Overview of the Child Protection System

In the first part of this paper, I will attempt to trace the impact of new Victorian Government legislation through its conception and implementation. A complex adaptive systems perspective¹ is used to frame the discussion. I use this approach to draw out an understanding of “knowledge” as it relates to the Victorian Community sector and the way in which changes to one part of a system can have a major influence on the whole system, often in ways that cannot be predicted. In the second part of the paper, I then make suggestions about some guiding principles a knowledge strategy might address in order to support the sustainability, diversity and responsiveness from a whole system perspective.

It should be stressed from the outset, that there is an intent expressed within the new Victorian Legislation to support genuine reform – and this is to be welcomed. What this paper does is outline a way of thinking about the origins and implementation of this legislation that might be reflective of a knowledge perspective. This way of thinking, in itself is an emergent approach. Much refinement and validating of what might constitute a

¹ Complex adaptive systems are discussed in more detail in the following section

knowledge perspective will undoubtedly be undertaken in the years ahead. This paper is designed to prompt thinking about such matters. This approach is timely, given the establishment of a VCOSS auspiced futures taskforce group.

Understanding system boundaries: a complex systems perspective

Historically, the delivery of services through CFS and the S-CPS have been differentiated through the adoption of specialized in-take services applied to the different sub-systems that made up the Child Protection System as a whole.

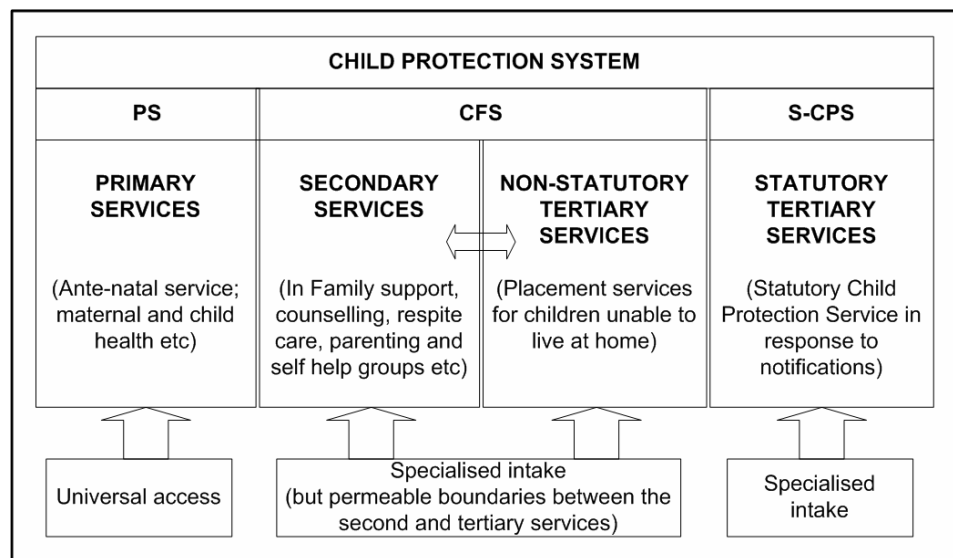


Figure 2: The historical situation: CFS and S-CPS as separate service systems defined by different intake channels

CFS and the S-CPS can both be regarded as examples of what are called complex adaptive systems. That is, both systems are made up of individual agents (people). The people that are the actors in these two systems (the staff, volunteers, system users etc) continuously adjust to changing conditions in their environment(s). They take actions both on an individual, collaborative and organizational basis and the aggregation of their actions give rise to the emergent patterns of behaviour of the whole system. Each sub-system is complex, because each are made up of many interconnected elements. Each is adaptive because there is an innate capacity for change. One of the distinctive features of complex adaptive systems is that one cannot easily predict how the system adapts to change because there are no direct cause and effect principles operating in such systems.

The example of the S-CPS as a complex adaptive system is outlined in Figure 2. As highlighted in Figure 2, knowledge is regarded as an emergent property of the system itself. That is, knowledge is highly relational – it develops in response to changes in

external environments. In this sense, knowledge can be regarded as the “*solutions to problems*” that arise from adaptations to a changing external environment².

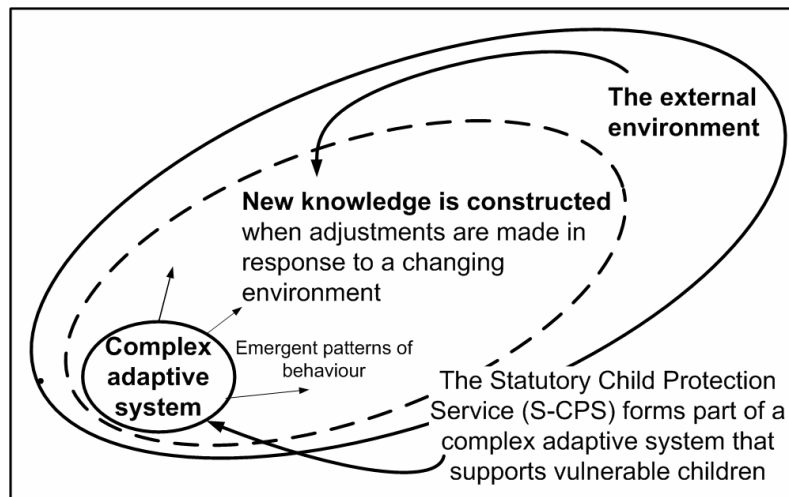


Figure 3: S-CPS as a complex adaptive system and the construction of knowledge

This way of thinking about knowledge as a property of a complex adaptive system provides a useful way of thinking about the reforms within Victoria’s S-CPS over the past eight years.

A KNOWLEDGE PERSPECTIVE OF REFORM WITHIN VICTORIA’S S-CPS

Origins of reform

In 2002, three key trends within Victoria’s S-CPS were identified by the Victorian Government as emergent issues requiring the attention of Government. These trends were as follows (DHS, 2007).

- The increasing volume of notifications to the S-CPS that are reported to have been closed at intake.
- The increasing volume of re-notifications, which has risen to over 60% of all notifications within the Child Protection sector.
- The increasing complexity of case work. Evidence of this was highlighted by DHS (2002, p 26) where it was identified that the proportion of parents involved in substantiated cases of child abuse with two or more characteristics increased from 9% in 1995-96 to 44% in 2000-01³.

² I am grateful to Dr Bill Hall for this understanding and the joint work with myself, Bill and Luke Naismith (Vines et al. 2007).

³ Types of characteristics for parents involved in child protection matters include the following categories: Mental illness; Intellectual disability; Physical disability; Family violence; Alcohol abuse; Substance abuse.

In response to these challenges of the S-CPS, including the impact of advocacy by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, the need for new solutions to problems was identified. As a result, the principle of earlier intervention was developed, and it was recognized that if the demands on the tertiary S-CPS were to be effectively managed, the involvement of other sectors would be required. This is highlighted as **Transition 1** of Figure 4.

New legislation

These changes in policy have now resulted in a major reform of the Victorian CFS. What has emerged has been the recent promulgation on April 23rd 2007 of two new pieces of legislation – the Children, Young Person and Families Act, 2005 and the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act, 2005.. The S-CPS, Community Services Organisations that make up CFS and the Children’s Courts – are all being impacted by these new acts.

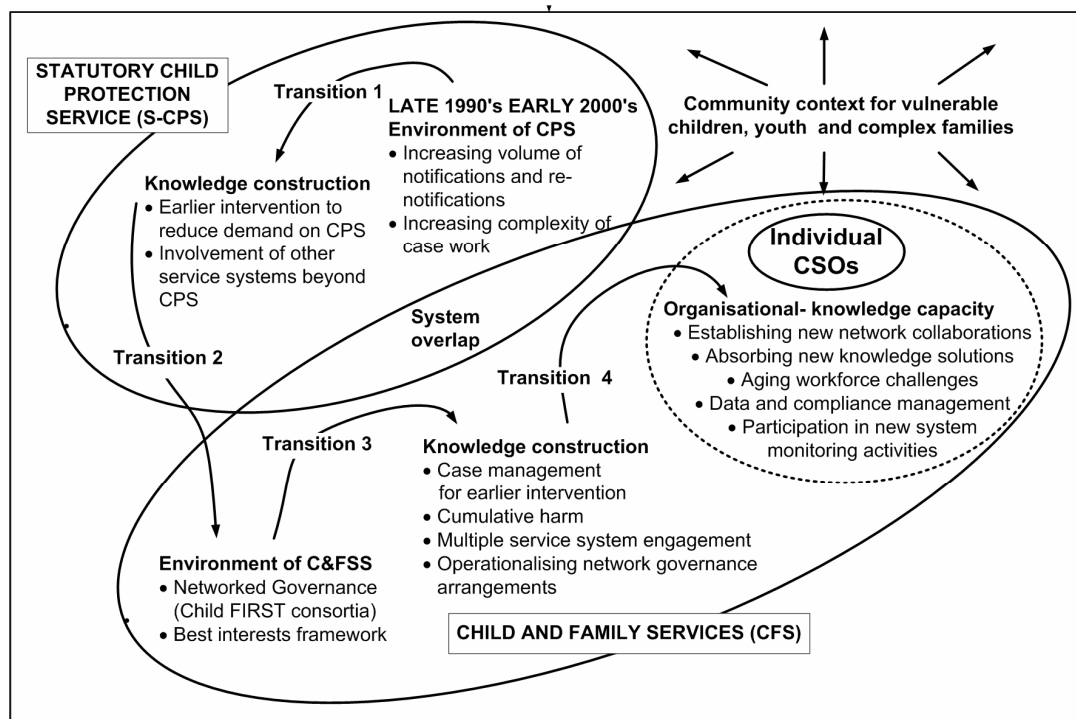


Figure 4: Reform of the S-CPS and the flow on impact on CFS

Impacts of reform within the S-CPS on CFS

What was originally identified as a problem for the Victorian S-CPS has now generated a major reform initiative for CFS. The impact of this new legislation is contributing to the changing environment within which CFS operates in two key ways (See **Transition 2** in Figure 4). First, the policy intent of the new legislation focuses on the imperative of delivering secondary services through both networked governance arrangements amongst Community Services Organisations (CSOs) and new partnership arrangements with the

Department of Human Services (Office for Children, p 18)⁴. Second, the principle of the Children's Best Interest Framework is a cornerstone concept in the new legislation (DHS, 2007).

At the heart of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (CYFA) is a unifying set of 'Best Interests Principles' that require family services, child protection and placement services to protect children from harm, protect their rights and promote their development in culturally, age and gender appropriate ways.

The need for new types of knowledge

I believe these changes to the operating environment of CFS are, in turn, catalysing the need for new types of knowledge within the sector. Representatives within CFS are grappling with a range of different challenges (see **Transition 3** of Figure 4) such as:

- New forms of case management that aim to integrate the concept of earlier intervention and the Best Interests Principles.
- Introduction of new work practices and cross-service system protocols to address the needs of parents of vulnerable children and youth. The implementation of the Best Interest Principles requires CFS to work closely with other service systems
- Systematic monitoring and management of cumulative harm.
- Operationalising new forms of network governance in the implementation of the new legislation, including the adoption of skills associated with data management.

This notion of cumulative harm is a new term within CFS and is defined as follows (Miller, [2006, p1](#)).

Cumulative harm is experienced by a child as a result of a series or pattern of harmful events and experiences that may be historical, on-going, with the strong possibility of the risk factors being multiple, inter-related and co-existing over critical developmental periods.

The Strategic Framework for Family Services developed by the Department of Human Services (DHS) aims to address this issue of cumulative harm through the implementation of a common assessment approach for both the Child Protection and Family Services sector, in order to strengthen service capacity to manage complexity and risk, and redress harms (Office for Children, p 4).

Implementation of the new legislation

The real test of the new legislation and the impact on the community context associated with vulnerable children, youth and complex families will become apparent over the next

⁴ Nine new Child FIRST consortia have now been established in Victoria. These consortia provide evidence of these new network-governance clusters. Twenty six new consortia will be established in the coming twelve months.

two years. However, from a knowledge perspective, a number of key points can be made that could do much to re-define the nature of partnership between the Government and the CFS.

Origins of reform

Much of the analysis that gave rise to the new legislation drew upon data derived mostly from the S-CPS and the Victorian Government’s understanding of this sector. That is, the solutions to problems seem to have been conceived primarily as solutions to S-CPS problems.

Changing boundary conditions

With the advent of new legislation, different boundary conditions now exist between the secondary and tertiary services. These are reflected in new and shared intake protocols across both CFS and the S-CPS. For example, in principle, intake assessments now result in the completion of common forms to both Child FIRST and the S_CPS. Child FIRST consortia are now reliant on S-CPS staff being co-located inside the Child FIRST consortia structures. Thus S-CPS activities now, for the very first time, form part of CFS and contribute to the risk management function of Child FIRST consortia.

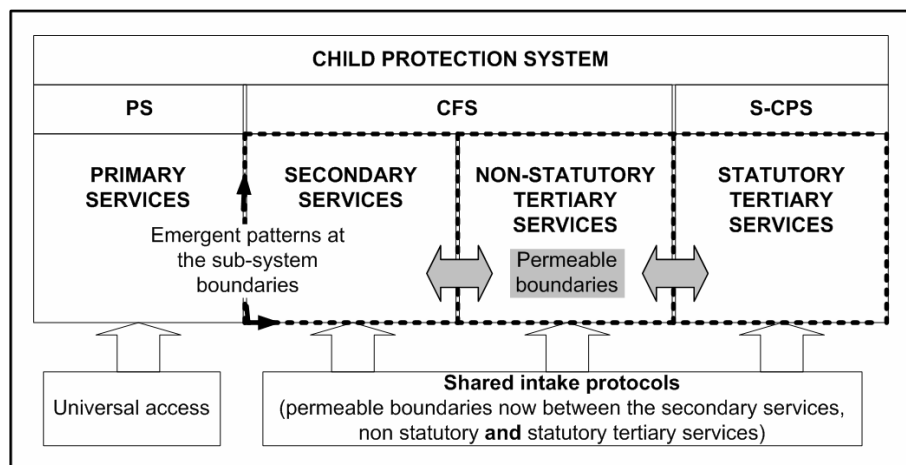


Figure 5: The impact of new legislation on system boundaries and sub-system interactions

From a complex adaptive systems perspective, when implementing a major intervention such as the changes described above, it is essential that mechanisms are in put place to identify emergent patterns of behaviour. Failure to do this and to subsequently support appropriate interventions could have some un-intended consequences.

Emergent patterns of behaviour

Changing the boundary conditions of complex adaptive systems can lead to new patterns of behaviour at the interfaces of the sub-service systems that make up the whole system. There is anecdotal evidence already of some emergent patterns. For example, CFS representatives suggest there is an unexpectedly high level of inquiries and referrals being made to Child FIRST consortia from local schools. There also appears to be a significant

rise in pre-birth referrals to CFS occurring. These examples of new patterns of behaviour are in line with the objectives of the new legislation and the objective of securing earlier intervention to prevent an overload on the tertiary S-CPS. However, these new patterns have the potential to run the risk of incrementally overwhelming this tier of the intervention system if a whole system approach is not adopted. Some of the reasons for this are outlined in the following discussion about new approaches to resource allocations and risk management; and the ability to access support services from other service systems.

Strategic re-mixing of resources and risk management

Whilst this shift towards earlier intervention is clearly welcome, over time, what might emerge is a re-allocation of resources towards the non-statutory tertiary domain of CFS. For less needy children, young people and families this could effectively mean less resources are available to support them. If such a pattern is not closely monitored and is left to drift, some families might ultimately end up in the tertiary end of the service spectrum. In other words, there is potential for both the intent of the new legislation and the sustainability of CFS itself to be undermined.

To deal with such system dynamics, a knowledge strategy would involve establishing mechanisms to monitor the emergent patterns across CFS as a whole and then subsequently support interventions based on understandings of emergent patterns that occur at the boundaries between sub-systems. An example of this is the respite care support available to foster and kinship carers.

*Respite Care sits at the **interface** (my emphasis) of foster care and family support services, offering a preventative intervention that avoids families becoming separated. Planned, time-limited, short breaks away from home are combined with family support work to promote change..... Australian and overseas research is clear that Respite Care is a **family support that parents value**. Parents, carers, practitioners, policy makers and researchers all describe how a 'lifeline' at a difficult time for a family, can prevent a family breakdown, which might result in children being separated from their families (Elefsiniotis, 2007).*

Over time, failure to attend to the emergent patterns arising at the boundary between foster care and family support services could accelerate an exodus of kinship and foster carers from CFS. Why would these carers continue to be providers within care system if they themselves were able to access necessary supports themselves to make sustainable contributions ? For the future, this type of emergent pattern, when aggregated with other patterns of behaviour has the potential to undermine the sustainability of CFS. Ultimately, this could have a serious and negative impact on the S-CPS as well, through this system becoming overwhelmed by new referrals as these families' problems are not adequately addressed within the primary and secondary domains of the service spectrum.

Cross service system referrals and data flows

There is already anecdotal evidence from representatives of CFS that in responding to the Best Interests Principles, the need for cross-sector referrals is increasing. That is, vulnerable children, young people and families require services drawn from a number of different service systems, examples of which are provided in Figure 6. As the complexity of the cases increase, the need for information sharing and exchange of client data increases.

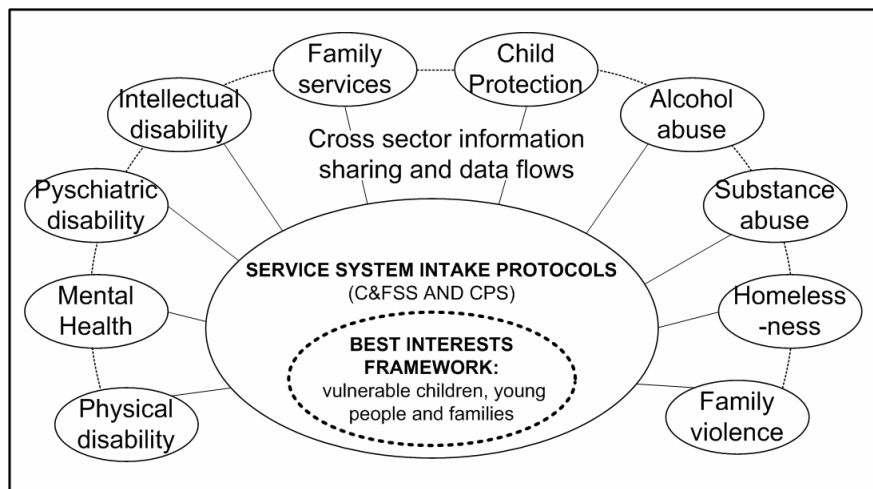


Figure 6: The Best Interests Framework and the need for cross service system referrals, information sharing and data flow.

New mechanisms to identify and implement strategic research

With the types of complex changes described above, the new legislative environment is likely to result in the need for new mechanisms to identify and implement strategic research. An important aspect of the new environment is that the research priorities need to be jointly defined by both the Government departments involved in funding the new service system arrangement, those that deliver the services and those that implement the research itself.

A KNOWLEDGE PERSPECTIVE ON FUTURES

What I have attempted to do in the first part of this paper is describe through a knowledge lens the origins and impacts of new legislation relevant to the delivery of services for vulnerable children, young people and families. In this second section, I will continue to use this lens to summarise what I consider to be some guiding principles that might give direction to new understandings of partnership between the Government and the Sector. It is suggested that giving expression to these principles might become a means of securing the on-going sustainability, diversity and responsiveness of the Victorian Community Sector as a whole. Some of these are relevant to **Transition 4** as outlined in Figure 4.

Principle 1: Respect for the contextualised nature of knowledge

Governments cannot control the development of new knowledge. When a disruption is experienced arising from the external environment, knowledge is constructed by people as a means of generating solutions to problems. A knowledge strategy must be premised on a principle of respect for highly contextualised expressions of personal and organisational knowledge. This principle lies at the heart of maintaining the future diversity of the Community sector and expressions of a just and civil society.

Principle 2: New mechanisms to identify emergent patterns

A knowledge strategy involves identifying, monitoring and responding to emergent patterns of complex adaptive systems. Such an approach might require new and low cost solutions for monitoring such patterns. One example of such an approach is the mass capture of anecdotes told by key stakeholder groups. A knowledge strategy would involve the development of appropriate governance mechanisms to reach negotiated agreements between Government and the Sector to support appropriate monitoring and subsequent interventions.

Principle 3: Intervening in complex adaptive systems

By monitoring emergent patterns in complex adaptive systems, appropriate interventions can be made. Such interventions would aim to amplify positive trends and dampen negative ones. The focus is on making evidence-informed choices. Strong emphasis would be placed on identifying, focusing and strengthening what works.

Types of interventions can vary from small exploratory probes to large scale reforms. Clearly at the present time, the Government's encouragement of Child FIRST consortia is a major intervention which DHS believes has the potential to deliver substantial benefits to Government, the community and ultimately service-system users themselves over time. But such interventions are likely to become problematic if there are not follow up mechanisms established for collaborative and authorised monitoring of emergent patterns. This would extend to reaching negotiated agreements about interventions to amplify positive trends and dampen down negative ones.

Principle 4: Support for organizational knowledge capacity

A knowledge strategy needs to strengthen the capacity of CSOs to manage their own organizational knowledge. Examples of initiatives that could assist with this include:

- Systematic examination of, and support for, current and successful approaches to the ways in which CSOs absorb new knowledge (as solutions to problems) via human network activities such as learning circles and working in networks.
- New processes to include the voice of the user in any system monitoring and impact analysis.
- Support for mobile workforce infrastructures and technology support systems to enable mobile / flexible work activities.
- Establish mechanisms for CSOs to continuously draw upon their historical vision and mission whilst ensuring these are contextualized within, and inclusive of, contemporary values and community needs.
- Learning and development program support for knowledge workers and their managers in order to:
 - Understand the nature of personal knowledge, organizational knowledge, and complex adaptive systems and how knowledge of these can contribute to securing the objectives of the Best Interests Principles.
 - Provide skills for working in collaboration networks and complex adaptive systems.
 - Address challenges associated with the ageing workforce, and to attract “baby boomers” back into the workforce in sustainable and effective ways.

Principle 5: Support for strategic research

To adequately focus on the needs of the future, new collaborative mechanisms will be required to reach collective agreements about research needs and priorities. Successful research outcomes are achieved when very specific needs are identified. It is essential that mechanisms are established to jointly conceive needs and to monitor the impact of knowledge uptake as research progresses in partnership with defined stakeholder groups.

Principle 6: Specific support mechanisms for data management

A typical Victorian CSO might be engaged in up to 5 different service system contracts with different funding stakeholders. These may include both State and Commonwealth Government areas of jurisdiction. Each funding body specifies the output performance required for the delivery of services. Performance related data needs to be logged into several different data management systems as outlined in Figure 7. In the case of CSO 1 in Figure 7, it is part of 5 different service systems each of which contributes to a percentage of overall turnover. The impact of these different data collection models is that it undermines the capacity of the CSO to create its own approach to data management and evidence informed decision making based on specific organizational knowledge requirements.

The challenges of collating quality compliance datasets are as equally formidable as those for performance monitoring data sets. This matter is outlined in Appendix 1. In this case, the need for different data collection is to provide evidence of compliance. Such needs are different for each type of service portfolio managed by CSOs.

A knowledge strategy would aim to equip CSOs to create flexible approaches to data management. This is a complex matter and requires a parallel and significant commitment to support research into data interoperability infrastructure. A knowledge strategy would recognize the strategic importance of supporting research work in such areas on a cross service system basis.

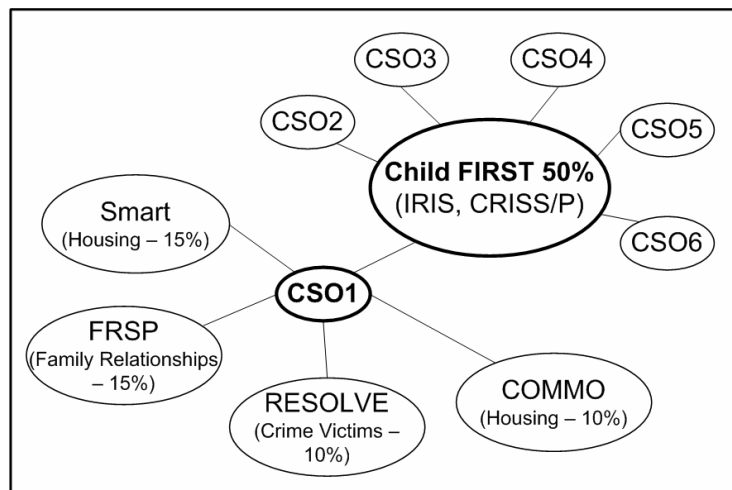


Figure 7: Multiple data system for different government programs (hypothetical case only)

Principle 7: Strategic research associated with interoperability

A difficulty with cross-sector data sharing is that different professional groups describe the elements of their data requirements in different ways (for example, in Figure 9 Schema, A, B and C refer to family services, mental health and housing data respectively). If a Family Services provider is to export data for use in other service systems in a seamless way, this would require an approach to cross service system interoperability at the service provider level. In principle, such an approach to interoperability would allow for a semi-automated and seamless process of transforming data from one schema representation to another.

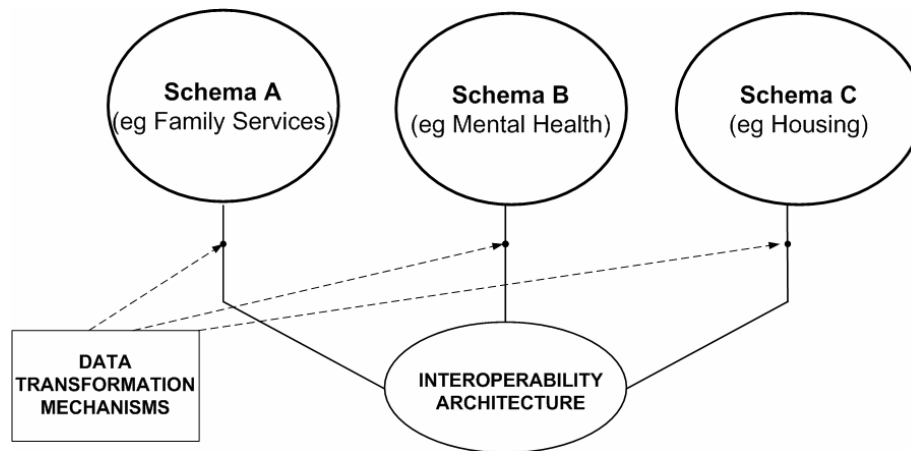


Figure 9: The concept of interoperability architecture

CONCLUSION

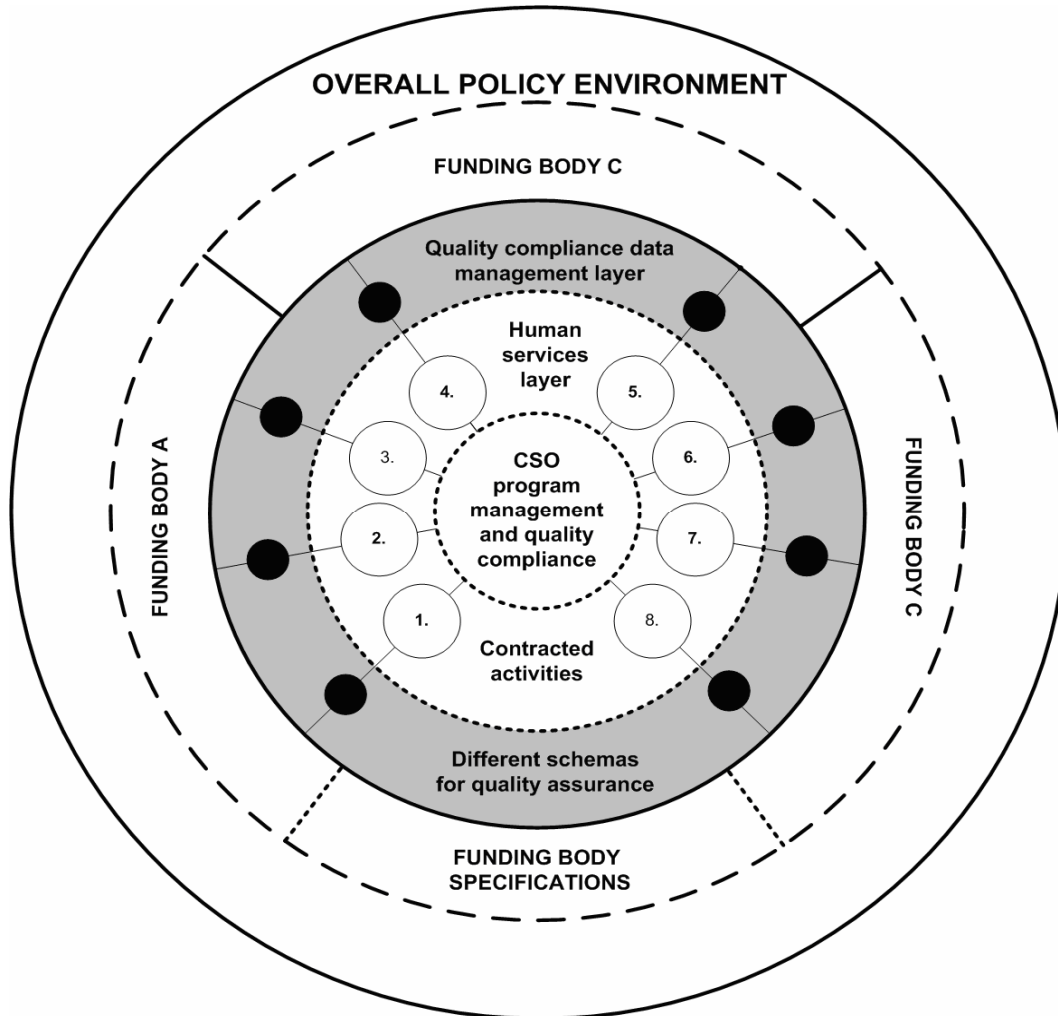
The Victorian Government has embarked on a major reform of the S-CPS and this is to be welcomed. The principle of earlier intervention and systematic monitoring of cumulative harm are new and important aspects of case management work in the child and family services sector.

In implementing new types of case management, the new legislation has resulted in the redefinition of boundaries between the S-CPS and CFS. The objective is to ensure the health and wellbeing of children, young people and families by appropriate community support and services, and thus to keep as many as possible out of the tertiary sector. On the negative side, there is potential for a significant reallocation of scarce resources within CFS to service the tertiary end of the sector as pressures mount in this area – thereby reducing the resources available to less needy children, young people and families. If this type of pattern is amplified across CFS, then there is potential that the sustainability of the entire child welfare sector could come into question in the years ahead. Already, there is evidence of emergent patterns which suggests that such a scenario could develop. Such indications are arising in foster and kinship care, where it is being highlighted that a systematic approach to respite care is required to prevent family breakdown and associated statutory placements of children.

Using a knowledge perspective to frame the discussion, a number of different challenges are identified if the future of the Victorian community service sector as a whole is to embrace a future built on the principles of sustainability, diversity and responsiveness. It is timely that thinking about such matters now occurs in systematic ways with the establishment of the VCOSS auspiced Community Sector Futures Taskforce. Hopefully this paper will play a small part in the process of continuing to contribute to civil society and to new and appropriate expressions of a just society.

APPENDIX 1

The Layers associated with quality compliance data management



REFERENCES

- Department of Human Services. (2007). Best interest framework for vulnerable children and Youth. Viewable at: <http://tinyurl.com/25s4dm> Viewed on June 20th.
- Department of Human Services. (2007). Training program to support the implementation of the Iris Data Dictionary for Family Services Program.
- Department of Human Services. (2002). An integrated Strategy for Child Protection and Placement Services.
- Elefsiniotis, J. 2007. Respite Care Research Project. Personal email correspondence.
- Miller, R. (Nov 2006). Best Interests Principles: A Conceptual Overview. Department of Human Services.
- Miller, R. (Dec 2006). Cumulative Harm: A Conceptual Overview. Department of Human Services.
- Office for Children, Victorian Department of Human Services. (2007). A Strategic Framework for Family Services.
- Office for Children, Victorian Department of Human Services. (2007). Child Protection System. Viewed on Wednesday 25th June at: [complete]
- Scott, D., (2006). Sowing the Seeds of innovation and sustaining hope in the protecting of children. Presented at Every Child Every Chance Launch. Melbourne. 13 April.
- Vines, R. Hall, W. and Naismith, L. (2007) Exploring the Foundations of Organisational Knowledge. In Press.