

**ACWA NGO Sector**

**Permanency Support Program (PSP)**

**Needs Analysis**

**Overview Report December 2017<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> ACWA wishes to acknowledge its members who so readily and freely shared their experiences and viewpoints with us on issues that are highly important to their casework practice and clients. ACWA wishes to thank the members of the Best Practice Unit (BPU) State Wide Reference Group who gave helpful advice on the proposed survey topics and maximising engagement with casework practitioners and managers, which helped refine the survey methodology. ACWA wishes to acknowledge the research assistance of Padraig Dorrigan and Gillian Brannigan, who facilitated the focus groups and assisted with undertaking the qualitative analysis and writing up of findings summarised in the Appendix; Melody Stack who helped co-ordinate the fieldwork and member communications; Lottie Harris who assisted with constructing the survey questionnaire; Dr Wendy Foote who assisted with recruitment and Dr Jen Doyle who gave research advice. ACWA wishes to warmly thank Penny Hood, Catherine Candiloro and Jennifer Ruane from the Permanency Support Program Implementation Team, Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) who provided invaluable advice and insightful comments on the design and conduct of the project.

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## 1. Executive Summary

To ensure a smooth implementation period for the Permanency Support Program (PSP), FACS funded ACWA to facilitate a needs analysis of the sector through its membership. ACWA undertook preliminary consultation with a range of out-of-home care and family preservation services across the state through a series of structured group discussions (11 focus groups with 120 participants). These were conducted in late August and September 2017 and involved frontline practitioners and managers telling us where the critical needs in their knowledge and organisational practice are and how they would like those needs met. These focus group findings were incorporated into a statewide online survey (132 respondents) conducted in October and early November 2017.

Evidence of a strong consensus across the NGO sector emerged from the findings on the key practice and skill development needs, and the breadth of associated support needed to achieve practice change in line with the reform. Respondents perceived that staff across their agency had a lack of understanding of the PSP program and what it meant for their day-to-day practice, indicating the need to permeate knowledge about the PSP more widely within agencies.

Strong positive preferences for all identified effective solutions were expressed with agreement ranging between **65.5% to 95.5%**, and indicated by the high mean total agreement across all categories (**86.7%**). Assessing parent's capacity for restoration was a top priority. There was a thirst for both joint training and information sharing with FACS. Respondents perceived that their capacity for collaboration with FACS would be enhanced by clarity on roles and responsibilities, joint training, expert guidance, and mechanisms for discussion of local permanency issues.

Coaching, mentoring, and other forms of group learning, particularly in the areas of restoration, guardianship and adoption practice were preferred as modes of support. Localised communities of practice appear to be another proposed mode of support with strong social validity.

## 2. Purpose of the needs analysis

Commencing from 1 October 2017, FACS implemented a wide range of changes to the child protection and out-of-home care sector. The name for these changes is the Permanency Support Program (PSP), which was announced in March by the NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian and Minister for Family and Community Services Pru Goward.

Our overall purpose for the needs analysis was to identify and evaluate the needs of the NGO child and family sector to support the successful implementation of the Permanency Support Program.

In order to achieve this, our specific objectives were:

- a. Focus on the identification of practice changes and implementation requirements of the sector as they relate to the new Permanency Support Program, and challenges to successful implementation of the Permanency Support program.
- b. Select a methodology for the needs analysis that would enable results to be reported in a timely manner, notably the use of group processes [target focus groups and online surveys] whilst tapping a rich diversity of caseworker and manager perspectives.
- c. Conduct the needs analysis to the agreed plan.
- d. With FACS, jointly communicate findings and recommendations to relevant FACS' internal

and external stakeholders and the sector.

### 3. Main activities of the needs analysis

The four main activities of the needs analysis we undertook were:

1. Identification of suitable focus target groups for the needs analysis (including pre-existing groups of expert informants to maximise trust and engagement) (*Phase 1*).
2. The use the focus group findings to inform the development the content for a statewide online survey.
3. The conduct of a statewide online survey exploring NGO Sector perceptions of caseworker critical needs, skills and capacities to improve permanency outcomes for their clients (*Phase 2*).
4. The assessments and reporting of findings including possible solutions to capability gaps preferred by participants (this report).

These activities are outlined in the following two sections below.

#### *Project timeframe*

The timeframe for the conduct of the needs analysis was:

- Design, scoping and logistics planning: July 2017
- Phase 1 Fieldwork (focus group interviews around NSW): August – September 2017
- Joint [Communiqué](#) to sector on interim qualitative findings: 27 September 2017
- Phase 2 Fieldwork (online statewide survey window): 25 October 2017 – 13 November 2017
- Data analysis and reporting: November 2017

The two phases of the fieldwork and the methodology are summarised below.

#### **3.1 Completion of the qualitative fieldwork component (Phase 1)**

Given the necessarily tight schedule for the implementation of the PSP reforms, a pragmatic consideration was to conduct enough focus groups to capture sufficient variation in contrasting opinions, and to reach data saturation, whilst enabling completion of the development of the survey component within the specified time frame.

By careful preplanning of each focus group session we were able to concatenate some steps (gap identification; ranking & solution finding) so that only one visit for a focus group was required (face-to-face time of approximately 2-2.5 hours duration) with appropriate pre-engagement and post-meeting follow up by video conference/teleconference/email as were required.

The focus groups schedule took place over a 5-week period (August-September 2017) and was planned where possible to leverage off existing ACWA specialist and statewide forums meetings by piggybacking invitations to participate in focus groups to meet on the same date.

**Table 1** below describes the geographic location, group size, composition, and recruitment method for the focus groups. One hundred and nineteen caseworkers, clinical staff, carer

recruitment and training staff and managers from permanency support-related agencies participated in eleven focus groups across metropolitan and rural and regional NSW.

To reduce travel time for participants and complete the focus groups within a compressed available period, two regional workshops were conducted by videoconference as shown in the recruitment method column (see “VC” flag). Two consultations attracting fewer than three NGO representatives, and the focus group were replaced with individual interviews/agency visits where ACWA staff were already in the area (see composition column).

**Table 1: NGO Sector PSP Needs Analysis – Phase 1**  
*Qualitative component (focus group interviews) to inform survey development*

Location/Forum	Size	Composition	Recruitment Method	Report No. (b)
Orange (a)	5	Managers and caseworkers from two agencies	Responded to invitation email	1
Bathurst	1	Manager	Responded to invitation email	1
Lismore (a)	23	Clinical staff, managers, caseworkers, intake, carer recruitment, house leaders, assessors from one agency	Responded to invitation email	2
Hunter New England - Coffs Harbour	2	Managers from one agency	Met following RIG	3
Hunter New England - Maitland (a)	12	Foster and residential managers, clinical staff, caseworkers and training coordinator from one agency	Responded to invitation email	3
ACWA OOHC Reforms Forum	16	Managers from fourteen agencies	Met following OOHC Reforms Forum	4
ACWA Best Practice Unit Statewide Reference Group	4	Senior practitioners from four agencies	Met as part of BPU SWRG	5
ACWA OOHC Forum (Telopea)	26	Caseworkers from ten agencies and two Health pathways	Met as part of OOHC Forum	6
Wollongong	25	Managers, carer recruitment, casework staff from one agency	Requested visit	7
Western, Far Western and Murrumbidgee	3	Managers from three agencies	Responded to invitation email for VC	8
Southern/Illawarra Shoalhaven	3	Managers from three agencies	Responded to invitation email for VC	9
<b>Total participants</b>	<b>120</b>			

#### Notes

- (a) Conducted as part of scoping phase
- (b) See Appendix A1 for Summary Reports. Reports were aggregated where shown, where necessary to protect confidentiality, due to a risk of identity or attribute disclosure (e.g. the small size of the group and/or uniquely identifying characteristics of their service).

### *Conduct of the focus groups*

The selection of effective focus group leaders was critical to ensuring valuable and unbiased data on service providers' perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards their implementation support needs.

The two group discussion facilitators were ACWA Policy and Membership Officers, who were highly experienced in focus group moderation skills, including empathic listening, being able to think conceptually, encourage broad participation and to be flexible and open to pursue the unexpected. Given their role in regular member consultations, they were perceived by participants to be trusted and have topical expertise, were familiar with the target audience and the group dynamics of pre-existing groups, and practiced in maintaining curiosity and neutrality without personal bias to individual member's views. Outside of the group moderation, they contributed to the planning, recruitment and reporting of the findings, ensuring the rich insights of participants in the group discussions was transferred into the findings and proposed actionable next steps.

### *Engaging participants*

To reduce respondent burden and keep to time, group discussion guidelines were converted to an information handout for participants to pre-read plus the option of a convenient template they could put their answers in prior to/during discussion that could be collected at the end of the focus group. The information pack was sent to participants prior to the workshops for pre-reading and familiarisation.

### *Focus group structure*

Prior to each focus group, facilitators explained to participants that of the group discussion would concentrate on their perception of caseworker practice needs for working towards permanency. Participants were asked to give their views on:

1. The critical needs in caseworker practice, skills and capabilities;
2. How they ranked them in priority to be addressed; and
3. What they thought the possible support solutions would be.

It was explained to participants that focus group workshops were anticipated to be 1.5-2.0 hours in length (depending on group size). The full session was structured to include a whole group introduction (5-10 minutes); whole group guided brainstorming of issues (40-50 minutes using a pre-developed framework); ranking of top 2-3 priorities (5-10 minutes); and group work to give specific consideration to overcome barriers and generate solutions to address top 2-3 issues (40-50 minutes). The facilitators adjusted the topics/questions to tailor them to the group size, composition, and region.

**Appendix A1** provides the confirmation of invitation e-mail template to focus group participants and the information sheet for participants, which explained the purpose, objectives and structure of the group discussion and recommended suitable pre-reading (e.g. PSP website, infographic sheets and video briefly summarising the impact of the reforms).

### *Thematic analysis of focus group discussions*

The thematic analysis the findings from each focus group is summarized and reported in **Appendix A1**. As shown in Table 1, a few reports have been aggregated where this was necessary to protect confidentiality, due to a risk of identity or attribute disclosure (e.g. the small size of the group and/or uniquely identifying characteristics of their service).

The summary reports of individual focus groups will be uploaded to ACWA website, once they have been validated with focus group participants and approved by FACS.

### **3.2 Implementation of the survey tool (Phase 2)**

#### *Consultation on the online survey tool design*

The content of an online survey tool was developed from the thematic analysis of the focus groups interview data and in consultation with FACS.

#### *Engagement of survey respondents*

As part of the focus group discussions, we consulted with expert practitioners from the ACWA Best Practice Unit (BPU) Statewide Reference Group by asking for their advice on engaging the sector with the online survey tool. The focus group participants told us to both maximise response rate and decrease respondents abandoning the survey we should:

- Keep it brief – no more than 10-15 minutes to complete.
- Provide a copy of questions so that an assistant can complete for the team (or their manager)
- Concrete incentives are important as an acknowledgement of their time.
- Avoid questions written in a way that forces the respondent into an answer that doesn't accurately reflect their opinion or situation (which in turn negates the survey data)

Reflecting this advice from expert practitioners in the field, a number of engagement strategies were utilised in the survey design. For example, respondents were only asked to rank priorities and support solutions where they have previously agreed or strongly agreed a caseworker practice; skills or capability gap existed in their agency. This was to ease respondent burden by removing irrelevant questions. In order to recognise and value the time of participants, ACWA offered 6 vouchers to be won for CCWT training relevant to permanency practice of up to two days (average value \$470). Participants were provided with a soft copy of survey questions and asked to identify if they were responding on behalf of their team following a team discussion.

#### *Inclusion of topics*

A practical difficulty with many training needs surveys is that provides very little guidance to real world decision-making. For example, in our experience with our CCWT training surveys, we have found that many people are unable to articulate their training needs without some direction.

A further constraint is that respondents can feel that engaging in blue sky thinking may only distract decision makers and funding providers from tackling the practical issues they face, and find it hard to transition to thinking about more comprehensive and meaningful solutions to the problems they experience.

For this reason we only included proposed solutions that targeted a specific practice change and could be succinctly described in few words.

To maximise the relevance of the available response categories, critical needs and proposed solutions were included in the survey only where they emerged from the thematic analysis of focus group discussions. Topics were selected for inclusion where focus group participants had identified them as one of their top 5 priorities. This enabled us to ask very specific questions with answer options that made sense to participants, thus permitting them to more accurately express their true opinions.

The BPU Statewide Reference Group and FACS were also consulted on the key respondent and agency characteristics to collect and the most useful response categories to use, whilst minimising respondent burden. There was a clear consensus from the consultation that seven key characteristics should be collected:

- Current Job Role
- Managerial position (yes/no)
- On whose behalf the respondent was answering (individual/team-based response)
- Area of operations (districts in which the services operated)
- Organisation size (using range of placements by funding stream as a proxy indicator – manager only question)
- Aboriginal-controlled agency (yes/no)
- CALD-specific agency (yes/no)

### *Questionnaire topics and format*

**Appendix A2** provides a copy of the survey questionnaire. This shows the survey question type was generally a series of questions in a standard agree-disagree format. The alternative is an item-specific approach with a unique wording/answer format for each item. Item-specific questions require a little more effort to answer than agree/disagree questions do, and thus result in longer surveys. In our experience with the target audience, if the items are meaningful to respondents they are still likely to give well-considered answers that best match their opinion. As we had extensively sought their views on what they should be asked in survey, this enabled the use standard answer format, which has the advantage of being quicker and easier to answer, without risking “straightlining” of responses.

The question sequence was structured to logically flow for participants as follows:

- Knowledge: Self-assess their own/their colleagues perceived level of knowledge of *what* the implementation of the PSP reform practically means for their day-to-day casework practice (Q1-Q2)

- Critical Needs: Identify where they perceive their agency's casework practice, skills and capability needs to be strengthened in order to achieve better permanency outcomes for children (Q3 – Q4)
- Priority ranking: Rank their top priorities in the order their support needs should be addressed (Q5)
- Solutions: Give their views on effective solutions (Q6-Q7)
- Provide further detailed comments – upload attachment (optional): (Q8-Q9)
- Agency/individual characteristics: Job title; individual or team response; FACS districts they operate in; Aboriginal OOHC agency or not; CALD OOHC agency or not; if manager – organisation size by funded placement type (range); primary area of work; e-mail address for incentive draw (Q10-Q19).

### *Recruitment*

To help build awareness of the online survey launch, feedback on the preliminary focus group findings was communicated to the sector by a communiqué jointly developed with FACS.

To ensure a wide reach to the target audience, various ACWA information channels including distributed the survey invitation and two reminders including:

- ACWA *What's New* (e-news) and ACWA website
- ACWA member representatives
- ACWA CEOs
- PSP NGO Sector Needs Analysis focus group participants
- Recent CCWT OOHC training course alumni (April-October 2017)
- Recent permanency-related BPU event participants (e.g. Client and Performance Outcomes Day; Tracking Therapeutic Outcomes Workshop)
- Frontline staff who attended the Foster Care Week 2017 carer picnic
- FNSW practitioner networks
- ACWA Policy and Membership specialist forums (including emergency placement consultation participants)

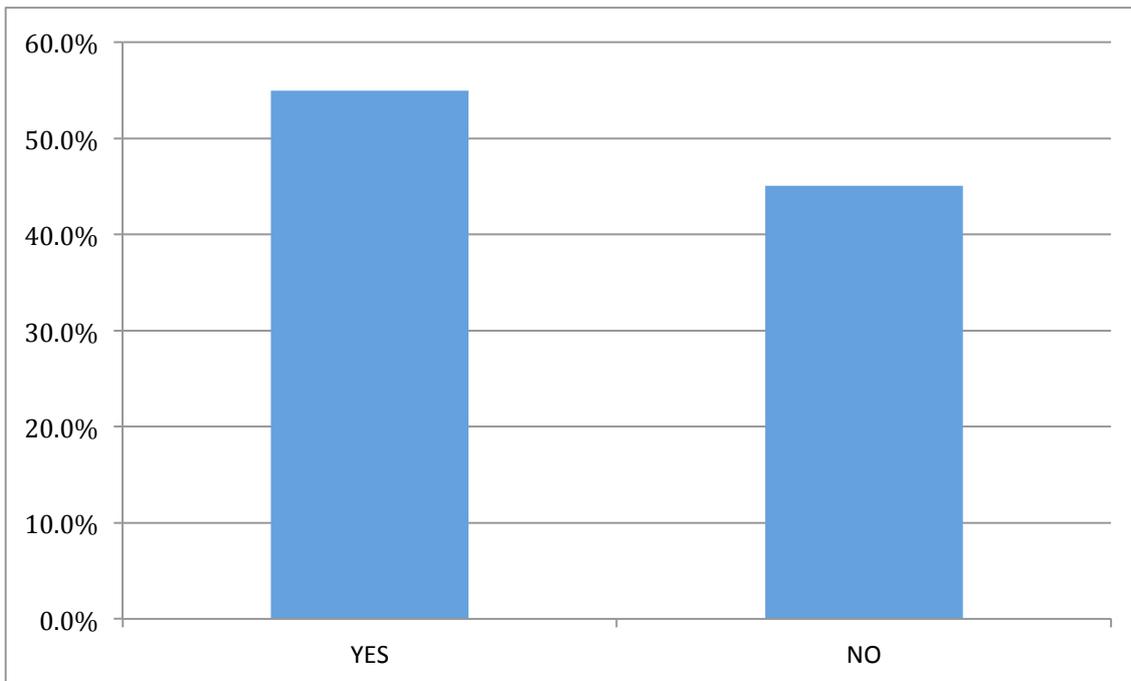
The survey window was open for a two-week period (30 October – 13 November 2017).

### **3.3 The survey sample**

#### *The respondents*

One hundred thirty two respondents completed the online survey working across all levels in permanency support agencies and in a variety of roles.

In terms of the composition of respondents by management responsibilities and job role, **Figure 1** shows that just over half (**55.0%**) were currently in a position of management; and just under half were frontline workers (**45.0%**).



**Figure 1: Are you currently in a position of management?**

Source: *Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017)*

As shown in **Table 2**, the most frequently identified job role was Caseworker/Social Worker (**33.6%** of participants), Senior Management (**19.5%**), and OOHC Manager (**16.8%**). The Other (**19.5%**) group included respondents who gave their job role as “carer recruitment and assessment”, “carer support”, and “therapeutic team leader”. Four respondents described their role as “carer” or “foster parent”.

**Table 2: What is your current job role?**

Current Job Role	Total respondents
Caseworker/Social Worker	33.6%
Senior Management	19.5%
Other (details specified)	19.5%
OOHC Manager	16.8%
Senior Case Manager	3.5%
OOHC Operations Support	2.7%
CEO	2.7%
Youth Worker	0.9%
Residential Support Worker	0.9%

Source: *Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017)*

The primary areas respondents worked in were diverse, as illustrated in **Table 3**. The predominant area was Foster Care and Aboriginal Foster Care (**58.5%**); Residential Care (**11.3%**); Adoption and Guardianship (**4.7%**); Family Preservation and Family Restoration (**2.8%**) and After Care/Leaving Care (**2.8%**); and Kinship and Relative Care (**0.9%**).

**Table 3: The area I primarily work in is best described as**

Primary area	Total respondents
Foster Care and Aboriginal Foster Care	58.5%
Other (details specified)	18.9%
Residential Care	11.3%
Adoption and Guardianship	4.7%
Family Preservation and Family Restoration	2.8%
Leaving Care/After Care	2.8%
Kinship and Relative Care	0.9%

Source: *Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017)*

About a fifth of respondents (**18.9%**) specified “Other” primary work area. Analyzing open-ended responses for this category, this either tended to be respondents who worked in “*multicultural foster care*”, “*OOHC clinical service*”, “*supported family group homes and supported independent living*”; or who reported a more evenly divided range of work areas across a spectrum of permanency support services. The latter respondents specified all or a number of the above e.g. “*residential and foster care*”, “*adoption and guardianship and family preservation and restoration*”.

Overall, the distribution of respondents by primary work area appears to be not markedly dissimilar to the placement workload of the NGO OOHC sector as a whole, particularly when the “Other” category is considered. For example, in comparison to the placement provision undertaken by NGOs, of the **6,396** compulsory school-aged children in statutory OOHC with NGOs on 30 June 2016, **73.7%** were in general and intensive foster care; **9.2%** were in residential care; **15.6%** were in relative and Aboriginal Kinship care; and **1.4%** in other types of care.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Agencies represented*

The agencies of respondents were geographically diverse in the areas they operated in, and also diverged in size (number of placements).

In terms of geographical spread, respondents worked for agencies operating in FACS districts in all regions of NSW as shown in **Table 4**:

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<sup>2</sup> FACS Statistics, Objective 1, Dashboard 8, NGO Partners - Breaking disadvantage

**Table 4: Which FACS district/s does your agency operate in?**

FACS District	Total respondents
South Western Sydney	44.3%
Western Sydney	38.9%
Hunter New England	38.1%
Sydney	35.4%
Central Coast	32.7%
Northern Sydney	30.1%
South Eastern Sydney	30.1%
Western NSW	26.6%
Nepean Blue Mountains	25.7%
Southern NSW	23.0%
Mid North Coast	22.1%
Illawarra Shoalhaven	21.2%
Northern NSW	18.6%
Far West	12.4%
Murrumbidgee	10.6%

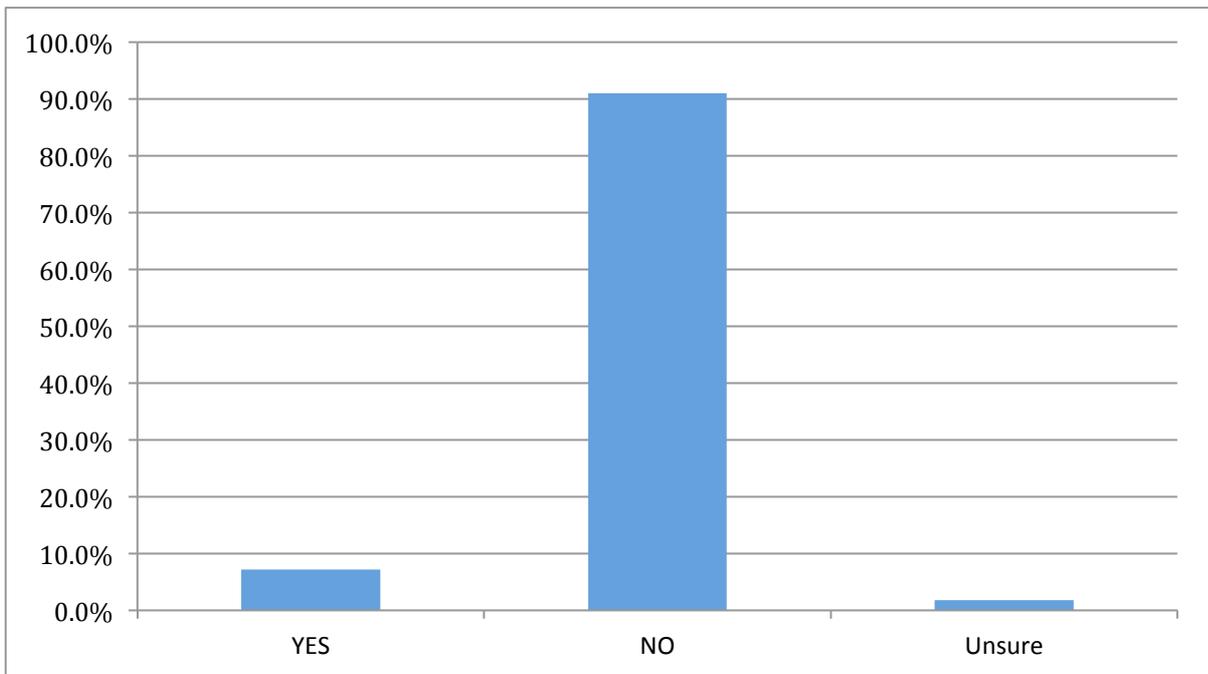
*Source: Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017)*

The most frequently nominated metropolitan districts for operation were South West Sydney (**44.3%** of agencies), Western Sydney (**38.9%**) and Sydney Metropolitan (**35.4%**).

The most frequently nominated non-metropolitan districts for operation were Hunter New England (**38.1%** of agencies), Central Coast (**32.7%**), Western NSW (**26.6%**), Nepean Blue Mountains (**25.7%**) and Mid North Coast (**22.1%**). Less frequently reported areas of operation were Far West (**12.4%** of agencies) and Murrumbidgee (**10.6%**).

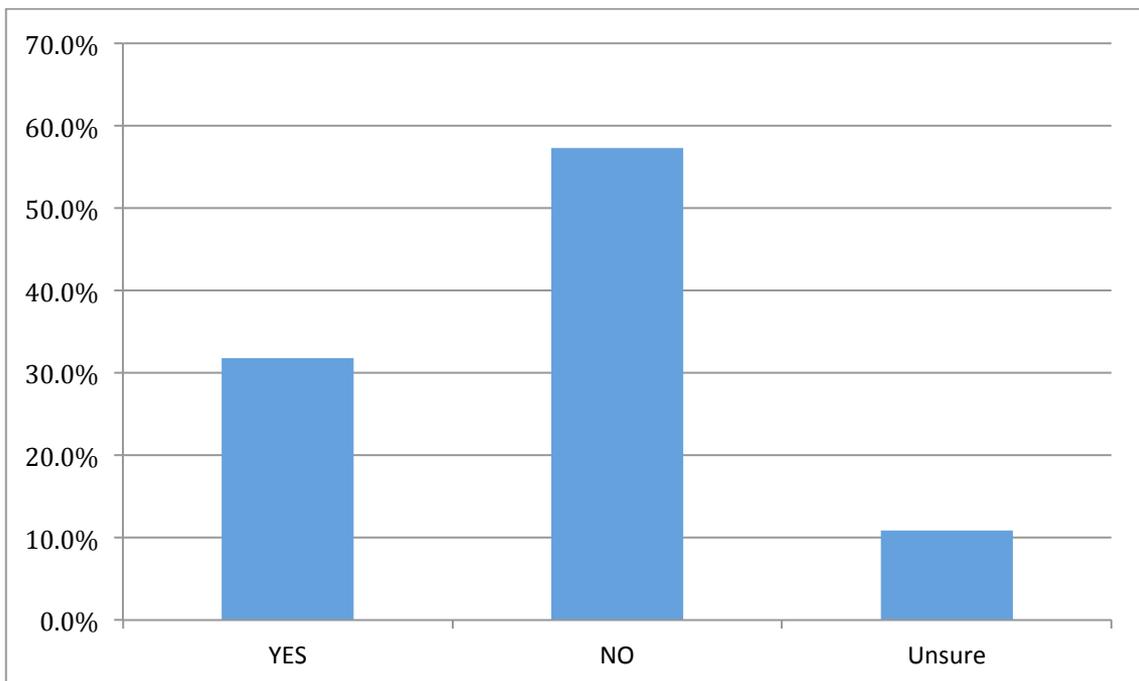
In terms of types of agencies, as can be seen in **Figure 2**, **7.1%** of respondents described their agency as an Aboriginal OOHC agency, whereas **28.9%** of respondents described their agency as a CALD OOHC agency (**Figure 3**). While not all respondents answered the latter question (22 respondents skipped) it appears we had a particularly strong response rate from practitioners and managers in CALD-specific agencies.

Notwithstanding this trend, a wide spread of agencies appear to be represented in the survey.



**Figure 2: Is your agency an Aboriginal OOHC agency?**

*Source: Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017)*



**Figure 3: Is your agency a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) OOHC agency?**

*Source: Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017)*

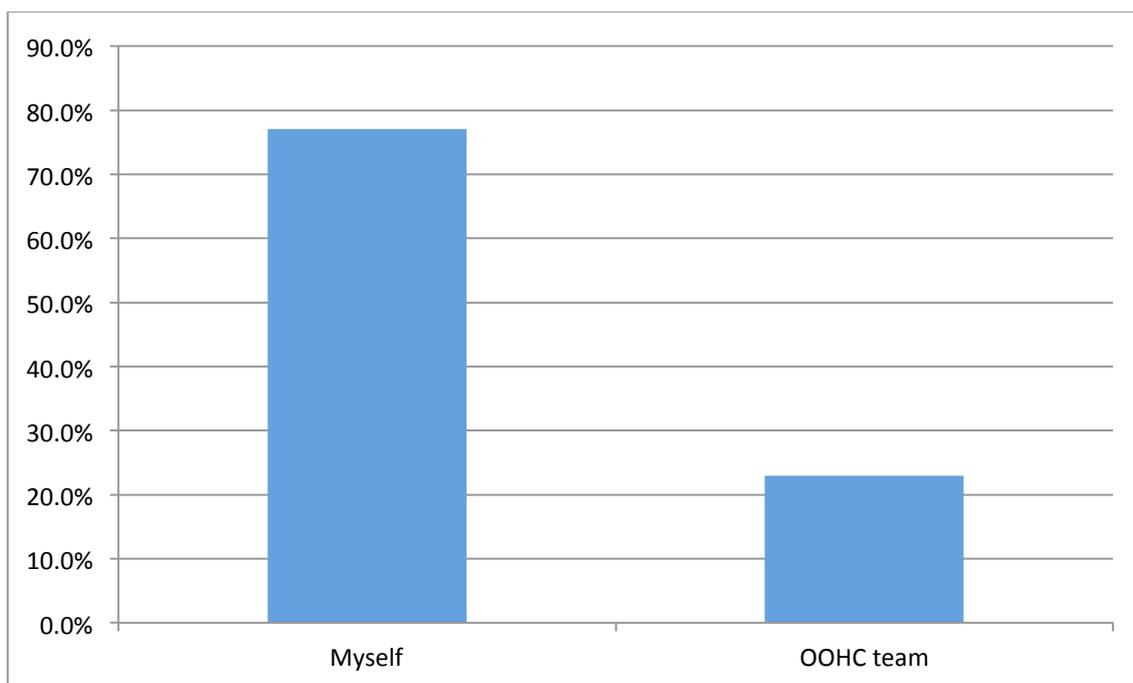
In terms of agency size by range (number) of contracted placement provision (which were questions only asked of managers) large, medium and small agencies were all represented.

For example just over half of managers (**55.9%**) who reported their current contract for service provision included foster care/kinship care were funded to provide 101+ foster care/kinship care placements, whereas **44.1%** reported they had less than 100 foster care/kinship care placements. Of the latter, just under half (**20.6%**) reported they were contracted to provide less than 50 placements.

#### *Survey data quality*

There is evidence that by connecting with its target audience and asking the right questions, the survey collected good quality data and therefore the findings can help inform actionable results.

As shown in **Figure 4**, nearly **1 in 4** respondents (or **22.9%**) were answering on behalf of their OOHC team. This suggests that the survey reflected the views of a significantly larger group than indicated by the number of individual respondents. It is also indicative of survey data quality in that a quarter of responses were well-considered answers based on team-based discussion.



**Figure 4: On whose behalf are you answering this survey?**

*Source: Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017)*

Where respondents were invited to make other open-ended responses, many respondents gave rich and detailed comments either contextualizing and/or enlarging on their responses to closed-ended questions.

For example in response to Q4, **thirty three** respondents nominated other areas they considered important in supporting their agencies permanency practices; in Q8, when invited to share other comments about permanency needs, **thirty eight** respondents made further comment

Respondent fatigue is a major threat to achieving high quality responses; and can set in as early as 15 minutes. Our average completion time was eleven minutes; indicating a low response burden (and reducing non-response bias).

#### 4. Key findings

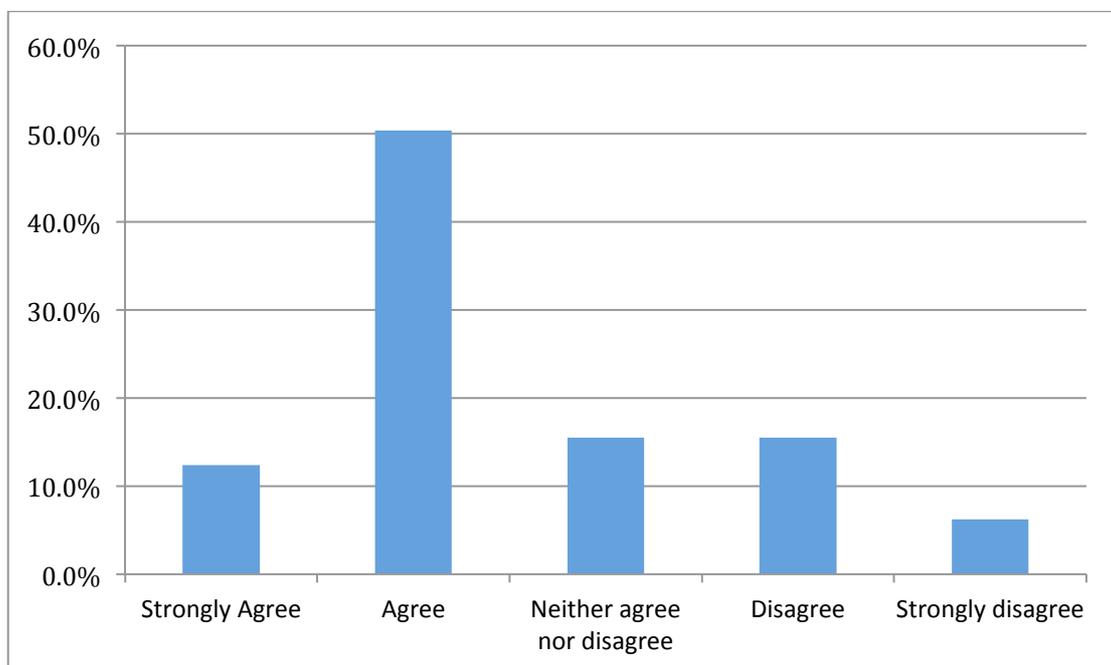
##### *Individual knowledge of PSP*

Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement: *“I am clear on the Permanency Support Program and what it means for my day to day practice.”* **Table 5** and **Figure 5** below summarise their responses.

**Table 5: I am clear on the Permanency Support Program and what it means for my day-to-day practice**

Response choice	Total respondents
Strongly Agree	12.4%
Agree	50.4%
Neither agree nor disagree	15.5%
Disagree	15.5%
Strongly disagree	6.2%

Source: *Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017)*



**Figure 5: I am clear on the PSP and what it means for my day to day practice**

Source: *Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017)*

**Table 5** shows that close to two thirds of respondents (**62.8%**) agreed that individually they were clear on the PSP and what it means for their own day to day practice. Of this group, half of the sample agreed (**50.4%**), and an additional eighth of the sample (**12.4%**) strongly agreed that they were clear about the PSP and its implications for their own everyday practice.

Over a third of respondents (**37.2%**) were either neutral or unsure (neither agreed or disagreed) (**15.5%**), disagreed (**15.5%**) or strongly disagreed (**6.2%**) they had clarity.

*Perceived knowledge across the agency of PSP*

Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement: *“In general, staff across my agency are clear on the Permanency Support Program and what it means for their day to day practice.”* The responses are summarised in **Table 6** and **Figure 6** below.

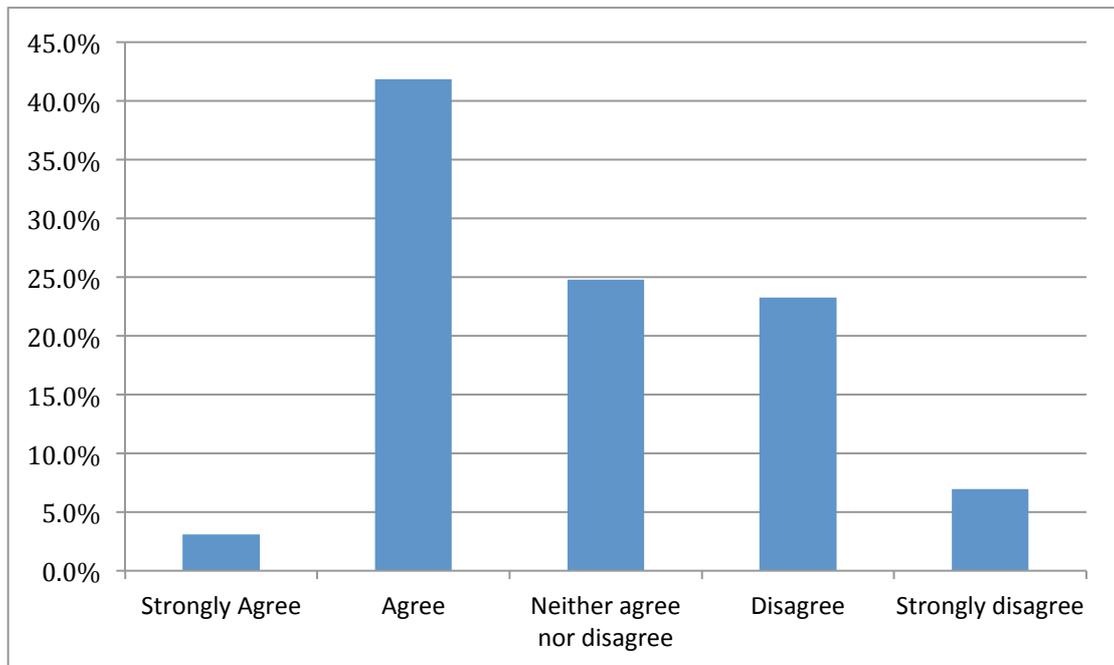
Overall respondents were less confident that this level of understanding was diffused to other staff across their agency. Less than half of the sample (**45.0%**) agreed that staff in their agency were clear on the PSP and what it means for day-to-day practice. Of this group, most agreed (**41.9%**), and only a very small proportion of the sample (**3.1%**) strongly agreed that staff across their agency were clear about the PSP and its implications for their everyday practice.

The majority of the respondents (**55.0%**) disagreed or expressed a neutral view. Of this group, a quarter of respondents or **24.8%** were either neutral or unsure (neither agreed or disagreed), close to a further quarter of respondents disagreed (**23.3%**) and the remaining group strongly disagreed (**6.2%**) other staff had clarity.

**Table 6: In general, staff across my agency are clear on the Permanency Support Program and what it means for my day-to-day practice.**

Response choice	Total respondents
Strongly Agree	3.1%
Agree	41.9%
Neither agree nor disagree	24.8%
Disagree	23.3%
Strongly disagree	6.2%

*Source: Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017)*



**Figure 6: In general, staff across my agency are clear on the PSP and what it means for their day to day practice**

*Source: Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017)*

*Critical needs*

**Table 7** summarises respondent’s views on the areas where they perceived their own agency needed to strengthen casework practice, skills and ability to achieve better permanency outcomes for children. Respondents were asked: *“To achieve better permanency outcomes for children, I believe that my agency needs to strengthen casework practice, skills and ability in...”* and to rate their agreement with a series of statements.

**Table 7: Areas where my agency needs to strengthen casework practice, skills and ability to achieve better permanency outcomes for children**

Area to strengthen	Strongly agree	Agree	Total agree	Neutral	Total disagree	N/A
Assessing parents capacity for restoration	50.8%	39.2%	90.0%	1.7%	6.7%	1.7%
Locating family members of children in care	31.6%	45.3%	76.9%	6.8%	14.5%	1.7%
Working and engaging with Aboriginal children, families, agencies and communities	33.0%	43.5%	76.5%	7.8%	13.0%	2.6%
Adoption casework resources	33.3%	42.7%	76.1%	11.1%	7.7%	5.1%
Working and engaging with families affected by trauma	27.8%	45.2%	73.1%	4.4%	20.9%	1.7%
Working with adults to support the child	26.1%	46.2%	72.3%	11.8%	13.4%	2.5%
Providing birth families permanency information	31.4%	36.4%	67.8%	22.0%	9.3%	0.9%
Writing affidavits	31.4%	35.6%	67.0%	20.3%	7.6%	5.1%
Assessing a child's development	23.7%	41.5%	65.3%	11.0%	22.9%	0.9%
Creating detailed genograms	22.2%	42.7%	65.0%	13.7%	19.7%	1.7%
Assessing safety and risk concerns	25.6%	39.3%	65.0%	12.0%	21.4%	1.7%
Assessing child wellbeing	21.4%	43.6%	65.0%	11.1%	22.2%	1.7%
Reporting and documenting casework decisions	20.0%	39.2%	59.2%	14.2%	25.0%	1.7%
Record keeping	18.3%	26.7%	45.0%	23.3%	30.0%	1.7%

Source: *Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs?* (Survey, 2017).

Importantly, these findings show there was significant agreement by respondents with the critical needs identified through the focus group research, with total agreement **above 60%** (and in some cases well above) for all identified categories with the exception of reporting and documenting casework decisions (**59.2%**) and record keeping (**44.7%**).

The top five critical needs nominated were assessing parents capacity for restoration (**90.0%** agreed or **9** out of **10** participants); locating family members of children in care (**76.9%**); working and engaging with Aboriginal children, families, agencies and communities (**76.5%** agreed); adoption casework resources (**76.7%** agreed); and working and engaging with families affected by trauma (**73.1%** agreed).

A small minority of respondents expressed divergent views. The level of total disagreement across the items was generally low (a mean total disagreement rate of **16.5%**). The lowest rate of disagreement expressed was for the area of assessing parents capacity for restoration (where only **5.0%** of respondents disagreed, and **1.7%** strongly disagreed, it was an area needing strengthening) and was highest for the area of record keeping (where **23.3%** of respondents disagreed, and **6.7%** strongly disagreed, it was an area needing strengthening). Overall few respondents expressed strongly disagreement, with the rate of strong disagreement less than **9%**

in every area of potential need.

### *Top priorities*

Respondents were asked “*Of these areas I have identified my agency needs to strengthen, I believe the top priority is...*”, using a ranking scale where 1 represented their top priority and 14 their lowest priority. **Table 8** summarises their average ranking of the priority areas they had identified, (where the largest average ranking is the most preferred choice) as well as the total percentage of respondents had nominated that area as one of their top three priorities.

**Table 8: Perceived top priority areas my agency needs to strengthen**

Priority areas for my agency	Average Ranking	One of my top three priorities (Total agree)
Assessing parents capacity for restoration	11.5	78.2%
Assessing safety and risk concerns	9.6	53.1%
Locating family members of children in care	9.3	40.5%
Working and engaging with families affected by trauma	9.0	32.9%
Working and engaging with Aboriginal children, families, agencies and communities	8.9	32.4%
Working with adults to support the child	8.7	36.4%
Assessing child wellbeing	8.6	38.7%
Assessing a child's development	8.4	30.5%
Writing affidavits	7.8	23.0%
Providing birth families permanency information	7.5	26.7%
Reporting and documenting casework decisions	7.5	9.3%
Adoption casework resources	7.3	27.4%
Record keeping	6.9	15.8%
Creating detailed genograms	6.3	7.0%

Source: *Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs?* (Survey, 2017)

Of the areas they agreed their own agency needed to be strengthened, and considering the average ranking, respondents believed that the top priorities to be addressed were assessing parents capacity for restoration (ranked first with an average ranking of **11.5**); assessing safety and risk concerns (ranked second with an average ranking of **9.6**); locating family members of children in care (ranked third with an average ranking of **9.3**); working and engaging with families affected by trauma (ranked fourth with an average ranking of **9.0**); and working and engaging with Aboriginal children, families, agencies and communities (ranked fifth with an average ranking of **8.09**).

No respondents selected creating detailed genograms as their first priority, which was ranked the lowest overall priority relative to the other critical needs for their agency.

## Solutions

**Table 3** summarises respondent’s views on effective solutions to strengthen casework practice, skills and ability to achieve better permanency outcomes for children. Respondents were asked: “*I believe that effective solutions to address these priorities should include...*” and to rate their agreement with a series of statements. The proposed solutions given to survey respondents had been identified through the focus group findings. Some illustrative examples of each theme (in the form of a relevant participant quote from the group discussions) are shown in the last column.

**Table 9: Perceived effective solutions to address identified needs and priorities**

<b>Proposed solution</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Total agree</b>	<b>Quote</b> <i>(Example from focus group discussion) (a)</i>
<b>Joint training with FACS and NGOs across all aspects of the Permanency Support Program</b>	60.4%	35.1%	95.5%	<i>“Bring FACS and NGOs together at every opportunity to develop common understanding, communication and engagement”</i>
<b>An expert point of contact for managers on tricky permanency related practice issues</b>	64.0%	30.6%	94.6%	<i>“It would be great to have a expert to contact to recommend best practice resources, and on handling difficult policy and practice issues”</i>
<b>Clarification document on the roles and responsibilities of NGO's and government agencies</b>	56.4%	38.2%	94.5%	<i>“Roles and responsibilities need to be clarified with clear and consistent expectations”</i>
<b>Mentoring for guardianship casework</b>	45.1%	46.0%	91.0%	<i>“An important skills need is working through section 90s in the context of permanency goals...especially guardianship.”</i>  <i>“We need to strengthen our practice in appropriate post-order support for guardians... [like] advocacy and support services at times of elevated need.”</i>
<b>Access to specialist casework and legal support for adoption</b>	54.1%	36.9%	91.0%	<i>“We need case manager training on legal work and documentation and need more legal support throughout the decision making process”</i>
<b>A mechanism for NGO and FACS managers to meet and discuss local permanency issues</b>	46.9%	42.3%	89.2%	<i>“It would really help to have mechanisms to resolve disagreements in views between FACS and NGOs, such as identification and understanding of cases [and appropriate] permanency pathways”</i>
<b>Sector wide glossary to support a FACS and NGO</b>	41.8%	45.5%	87.3%	<i>“There is a huge need to understand and use consistent common</i>

<b>Proposed solution</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Total agree</b>	<b>Quote</b> <i>(Example from focus group discussion) (a)</i>
<b>common language</b>				<i>language between NGOs and FACS"</i>
<b>Mentoring for adoption casework</b>	44.1%	41.4%	85.6%	<i>"This would help build confidence in assessing risk and capacity, and [foster] critical thinking"</i>
<b>Agency specific face-to-face Permanency Support Program information sessions</b>	43.2%	41.4%	84.7%	<i>"I know for my team, face to face training and support is really valued, as well as things like podcasts they can use while travelling"</i>
<b>Access to written Permanency Support Program information</b>	40.5%	44.1%	84.7%	<i>"I'd like to see more online resources, with information, research articles and best practice resources such as policy and FACS-approved report templates and examples"</i>
<b>A community of practice to share and communicate best practice at a local level</b>	31.5%	50.5%	82.0%	<i>"If communities of practice could be fostered and supported in my region that would be a really useful way to share good practices and ideas"</i>
<b>A mechanism for NGO and FACS caseworkers to meet and discuss local permanency issues</b>	44.6%	35.5%	80.0%	<i>"It would be great to have reciprocal invitations to team meetings between FACS staff and NGOs, to facilitate information exchange and discuss 'out of the box' solutions"</i>
<b>A podcast series on current permanency best practice and wider sector reforms</b>	23.6%	41.8%	65.5%	<i>"Podcasts of presentations and forums would be fantastic... I spend so much time driving, I could use that time [travelling] keeping up to date"</i>

Sources: Improving permanency outcomes: What are your support needs? (Survey, 2017; Focus Group Findings, 2017).

Notes: (a) In order (from top of column to bottom): Senior manager, BPU SWRG; Manager, Orange – Bathurst; Caseworker, Hunter New England; Caseworker, Wollongong; Manager, Western, Far Western and Murrumbidgee; Senior manager, BPU SWRG; Manager, Western, Far Western & Murrumbidgee; Manager, ACWA OOHRC Reforms Forum; Senior manager, BPU SWRG; Manager, Orange – Bathurst; Manager, Southern/Illawarra Shoalhaven; Manager, Southern/Illawarra Shoalhaven; Manager, Western, Far Western & Murrumbidgee; and Manager, Orange – Bathurst.

Significantly, support was strong for all identified effective solutions with agreement varying between **95.5%** to **65.5%** (mean total agreement across all categories was **86.7%**).

This reflected a relative consensus amongst the statewide survey sample with the effective solutions identified through the focus groups findings. Only respondent strongly disagreed with any of the proposed effective solution, as one respondent strongly disagreed that joint training with FACS and NGOs across all aspects of the Permanency Support Program would be an effective solution.

The highest level of disagreement for any category was **7.3%** for podcasts, where nearly four times as many respondents were neutral (**27.3%**) than disagreed. Whilst the survey findings showed relatively less strong support for a podcast series (two thirds of respondents or **65.6%** agreed), this was in contrast to the regional and remote focus groups findings which strongly identified podcasts as an effective solution.

### ***5. Implications for implementation – learning and development issues***

There is a number of learning and development issues arising from the survey are summarised below.

Taken together with the focus group findings, the trends in survey data suggest that there is still some significant lack of understanding about how day-to-day practice will be affected, which may be in part reflect a need for clarity on the what needs to be done by NGOs, and where FACS will lead. One participant commented “*Apart from what I have read or heard my agency has never discussed this with me*”. There may be both a need for up skilling on what to do as well as role clarity in who holds the requisite expertise. There may also be a piece of work on communicating the operationalization of the reforms, and also some work around drilling down in agencies and districts to find where consistency in implementation is an issue.

There is clear evidence of a thirst to have joint training and information sharing with FACS and NGO staff although, traditionally, this what has not always happened on the ground. One challenge in bringing this to reality is the differences between roles and procedures between agencies. Respondents perceived that their capacity for collaboration with FACS would be enhanced by clarity on roles and responsibilities, joint training, expert guidance, mechanisms for discussion of local permanency issues etc.

Respondents perceived assessing parents capacity for restoration as a top priority. Respondents felt less well equipped in elements of restoration and adoption practice, and expressed a need for extensive training and/or access to expert services. Related to this was a strong desire for mentoring in guardianship and adoption. Coaching, mentoring and other forms of ongoing group learning are particularly effective when embedding new systems and processes.

Lastly, there is strong support for the establishment of localised communities of practice, again across government and non-government agencies. The literature around communities of practice highlights the need for ongoing support of the leadership/core group in order to make these communities sustainable.