

CARING RECORDS

notes from a pressured system

This zine brings together what workers, educators and students told us about case recording in a pressured system. It draws on the findings of **Caring Records**, a collaboration between information management researchers in the Faculty of IT at Monash University (Associate Professor Joanne Evans and Research Fellow Barbara Reed) and child protection researchers at the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia (Dr Martine Hawkes).

The project, funded by the Whyte Fund, examined the challenges to rights-based and child-centred recordkeeping in child protection contexts.

Thank you to the Social Work and Practice educators, Child and family services workers, Child Protection workers, and Social Work students who spoke with us.

Publications

Hawkes, M., Evans, J., & Reed, B. (2024). Caring records: professional insights into child-centred case note recording. *Archival Science*, 1-25.

Vincent, S., Hawkes, M., Ogle, J., Evans, J., & Reed, B. (2024). From passive subjects to active agents: enabling child-centred recordkeeping in social care contexts. *Archives and Records*, 1-19.

weather system

Across inquiries and coronial findings, the same problems keep appearing. The child protection system is described as overloaded, fragmented and stuck in crisis response. The records contain gaps, inconsistencies, unclear reasoning, missing detail.

None of this is new. The issues with records have been repeatedly documented, and the conditions that produce them have not shifted much.

This is the climate workers walk into. A system carrying years of findings about poor practice, still operating under the same pressures. The weather is already set when the work begins.

the conditions

Recordkeeping is routine but uneven. It is the ground beneath the practice.

Recording is a fundamental aspect of social work practice. It is simultaneously mundane and complex, often constituting the most enduring artefact of social work intervention. In the child protection system, it's the evidence of work that has occurred, contact that has been made, and decisions that have been taken.

The work sits inside pressure, speed, case volume, staff turnover, risk systems, court deadlines, unclear rules, and not enough time to think. The environment shapes what ends up on the page before anyone even starts typing.

In interviews, workers described coming into the day already behind. Files waiting. Notes from yesterday unfinished. Some said recording becomes something squeezed in, not something supported. The system treats it as admin, but the stakes are enormous.

"(It's) very difficult when your resources are limited and when you're under enormous numbers pressure." (Social Work Educator)

"I used to use very factual: 'Today I visited so and so. Wanted to discuss this. Was unable to discuss it because this this, this, this, this happened'. You know, 'I will attempt to address these issues at my next visit'. And I found that I did that because I was actually really short of time. I couldn't do reflective recording. I couldn't do a lot of that detailed, perceptive recording that I learned at University where you can think about your feelings as you were discussing certain things and what the client was perhaps alluding to, I just couldn't."

(Child Protection worker)

Participants talked about how it feels to record when you are surrounded by crisis. One educator said workers often don't have the "time or space to think about these things critically," like how to represent a child or how to centre them in the record. Those questions collapse under urgency.

Notes designed for court, audits, supervisors, inquiries.

Notes that must prove something, justify something, defend something.

Others described the push towards risk language.

Case notes that have to speak to everyone except the child.

The conditions explain why children go missing in their own files.

This is the ground you are walking on.

Uneven. Rushed. Heavy.

But still, people try to write with care.

"Who is this little kid? [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I often look for [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the picture of who the child is. Can I tell [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] who this little boy is I'm talking about?

[REDACTED] Is he a giggler? Is he a joke boy? [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Is he a [REDACTED] little boy who hardly says a word? [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] That picture of the child has to be alive and

[REDACTED] well in the record [REDACTED]. But often, there's [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] nothing that describes the child.

[REDACTED] It [REDACTED]
describes the depth of the problem, but [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] not this little child." [REDACTED]

"So we talk about visibility of the child or invisibility. And that can happen in case files as well."

(Social Work Educator)

"[Child Protection workers] are not going out saying to a family, I'm letting you know whatever you say to me today, I will be documenting, and I'm going to put it on my system, and it will be in there forever"

(Child and Family Services worker)

In the interviews, people admitted what most workers already know but rarely say outright: the system is set up to record the crisis, not the child. The paperwork fills itself with risk categories, incidents and performance demands.

When the focus is solely on deficits and risk, the record shrinks down to problems and the child shrinks from sight.

Language came up a lot. Families see labels in their files they were never given a chance to understand, let alone challenge. Words like "unkempt," "parentified," "cumulative harm".

J "I went out and had a yarn with the mother and the grandmother and they said to me, 'she's disrespectful. She doesn't listen to me'. And I said, 'Tell me more about that'. And she said, 'Well, every time she comes to my house, all she does is write on her paper and she writes in cursive and I can't read it. And it's too small. And I don't know what she's writing about me. And she wants to go into all these concerns and she doesn't stay on one topic and then she'll write that topic and then she goes, 'I just stopped listening and I don't want to talk to it because she's disrespecting me because she's pushing the pen on the paper and not being with me in my story'." (Child and Family Services worker)

Nobody talked about learning this work from a neat set of rules. What they described was much more uneven. People work out how to record by seeing how others do it, seeing what gets questioned, and seeing what lands badly later. The Social Work curriculum is thin compared to what happens once they're in practice.

“Something that I find interesting was just how there was less critical thinking or less tolerance of critical thinking amongst some students (...). Some students wanted a formula to work to. In a way, seeing social work with children as a science rather than an art” (Social Work Educator).

“I personally believe having a course that focused on the specifics of case writing would be extremely beneficial. even if it was a optional course to take.”
(Bachelor of Social Work student)

“Oh god yeah, just have a module on how to do it.” (Social Work Educator)

They described learning by watching.

Shadowing someone who explains why a detail matters.

Seeing case notes used in court.

Wondering what it's like to read about yourself in a case note.

These moments put weight into the work. All the moments where the record suddenly matters in a concrete way.

At the same time, the map is patchy. Students vary widely in experience and confidence. Some want clear formulas. Educators worry that formula-based teaching removes the critical thinking needed for complex decisions. Workplace supervision ranges from strong to almost absent. All of this affects the notes that get produced.

"We don't have any sort of guidelines. And because a lot of people are either like more youth work rather than social work and or have come from other backgrounds, there is no clear guideline around youth work record keeping. And so, and because we don't have a policy, it sort of remains a little bit unclear around expectations."

(Child and Family Services worker)

Students

Child

"Honestly, it varies the same way it varies across staff members in terms of the quality of it. Some social work students will just nail it. Others will really struggle to just maybe understand even the purpose. And maybe it hasn't really been clearly articulated to them around the purpose of it. And therefore, if you don't know the purpose, you're sort of not really that invested in it, I guess." (Child Protection worker)

"But you just need one child to teach you why the recording is important. People who don't go to trial really don't understand how valuable our records become in this space. But also people who haven't had to meet with a young person post-care or, you know, haven't had a tricky experience with a young person or a family member don't understand what it's like to read about your life in a judged way." (Child Protection worker)

The people we spoke to want records that keep the child present, but the system makes that harder than it should be.

"I remember being told as a new worker that if something happens to your young person, the person on your caseload say, you know, something tragic happens and they pass away, that literally they will come to the office, grab your file and take it. And if it's not in there, there is no chance... there's no recourse. You can't go 'but I did make that phone call and I did ring that mum back'. And that in reflection probably was what put the fear of God into me making sure that I did record things well so that if something did ever happen, that you've got your, you know, you've got your records to say, 'no, I did'." (Child Protection worker)

"You've got to know your staff. You've got to know where they're at. Because it's high pressure and sometimes criticism, even well-intentioned criticism, can be enough to just tip them on the day. And I always say to staff, you know, when we're doing a letter to families trying to make a point, is 'when would you stop reading the letter?' Is it after? 'Unfortunately', you know, at what point would you rip that letter in half and throw it in the bin? Or if you were to get home and that was in the letterbox, how would you feel, on your front doorstep? What's the goal of leaving this note or writing this letter or having this meeting? What's the agenda? What's the purpose? What would you want if you were the client? How would you behave if you were the client? And then you change the way you write." (Child Protection worker)

detours

Workers described practices that help them keep records usable in the middle of heavy workloads and unclear expectations. These are informal habits rather than organisational approaches.

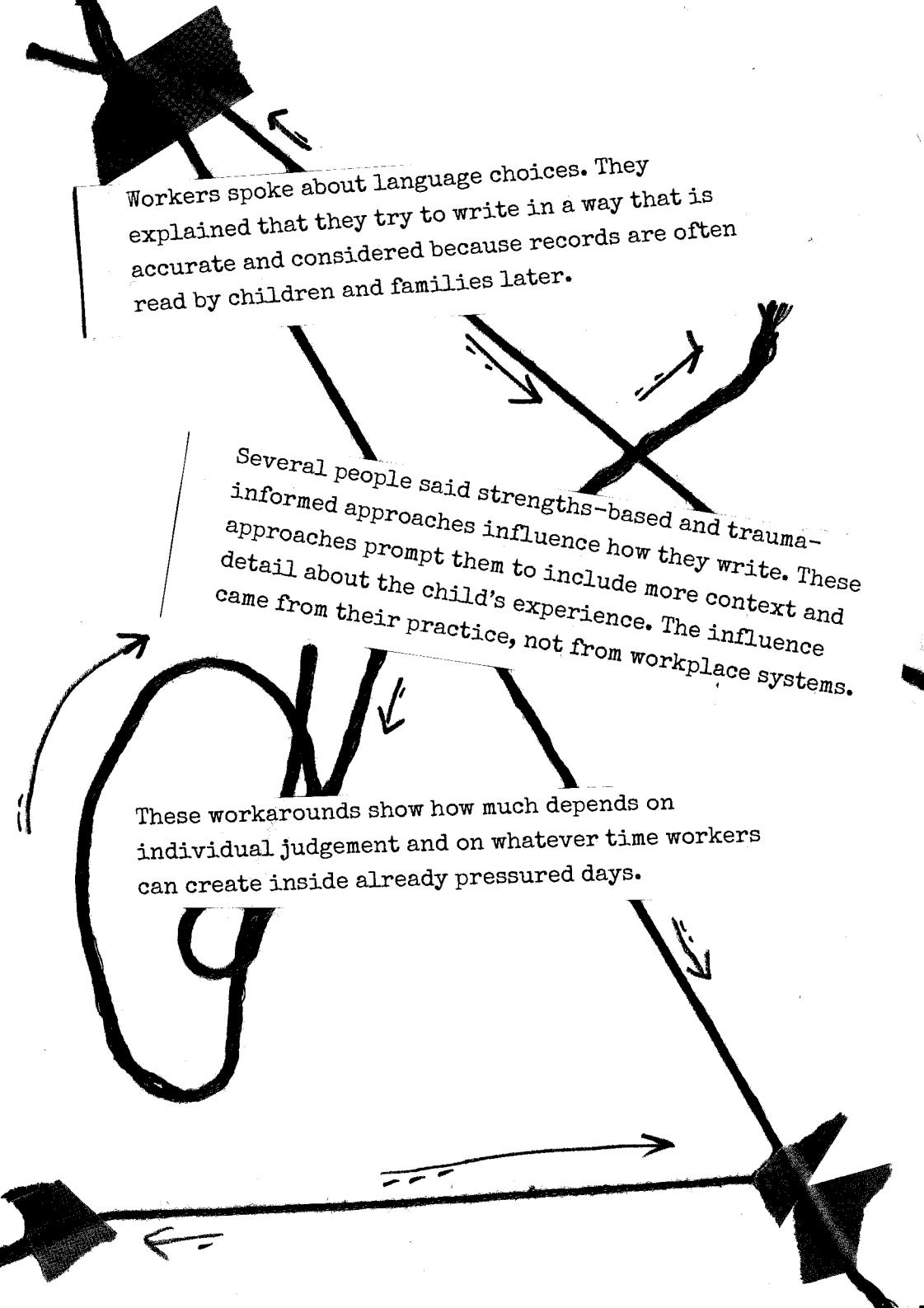
Some people said they look at earlier notes or talk with colleagues to check whether their recording is clear. These conversations help them make sense of cases that have several authors or long histories.

There were also examples of involving children directly. One worker described asking a child what they wanted included after a session and turning their words into the note. They said this produced a clearer record of the interaction.

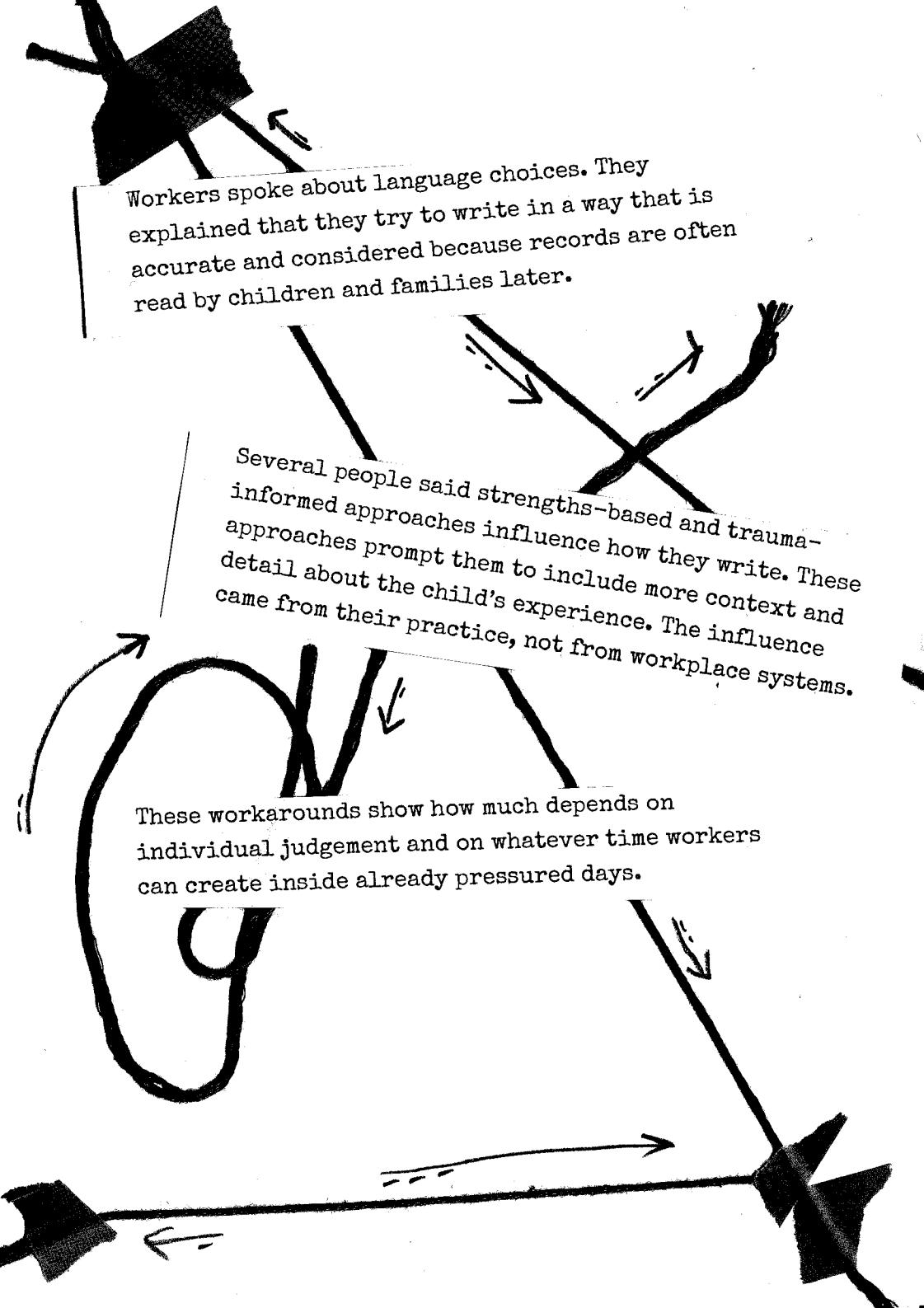
"I think for children, when we've when we've actually asked children to develop the record of that session. So, you know, 'out of out of this hour, we've spoken about a few things. What is it that you would like to let Mum and Dad know' or 'what do you want to bring to this meeting?' That becomes really powerful, actually, at the end of the day, that's an example of a really clear and a really powerful document." (Child and Family Services worker)

“... I need you to paint me a picture of what transpired. Help us be in the room with this child. So it's those kind of things that I might talk to, you know in reflective supervision with staff. How does this client make you feel? You know, have you thought about what it's like for them every day when you ask them to be here for a 9:00 meeting? Where are they coming from? How are they getting here? Is that humanly possible or have we started their day off in a really shitty system? What's going on? How is family contact structured? Where do these people feel safe? Who are the safe people around them? Can we have them participate? Our office is not a great place for parents who've been in care to come back to. It's not a great place for asking Aboriginal people to come to. So it's thinking about that right down to the structure of what we do. So I'm constantly trying to get staff to reflect on another's experience of what's going on. And that way you'll see the notes are much more compassionate and planning is more set up for success.”

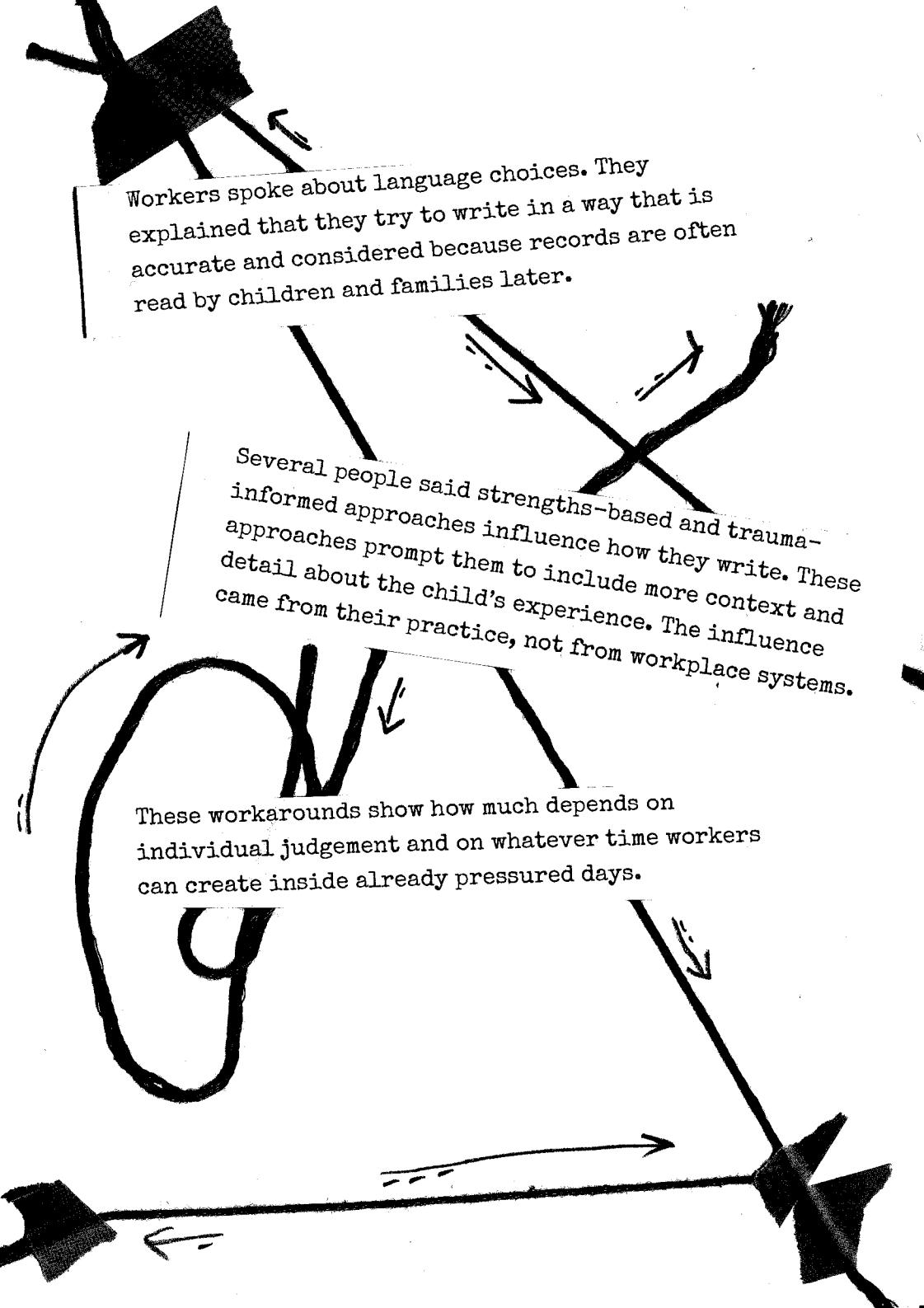
(Child Protection worker)



Workers spoke about language choices. They explained that they try to write in a way that is accurate and considered because records are often read by children and families later.



Several people said strengths-based and trauma-informed approaches influence how they write. These approaches prompt them to include more context and detail about the child's experience. The influence came from their practice, not from workplace systems.



These workarounds show how much depends on individual judgement and on whatever time workers can create inside already pressured days.

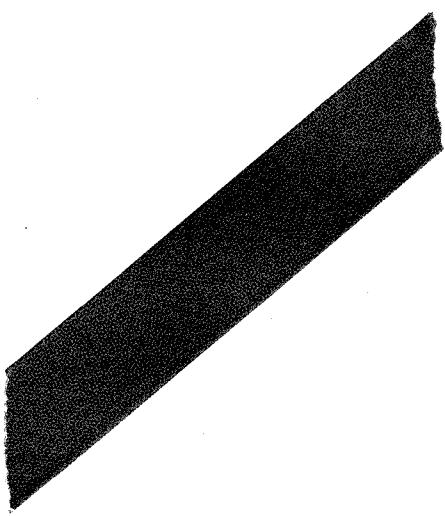
Field notes

The problems with child protection recordkeeping have already been mapped in detail. Inquiries, coronial findings and internal reviews have repeated the same points for years. Everyone working in the system knows this material. Another round of describing the gaps won't change anything. The question is what it takes to shift practice and the systems that shape it.

The interviews make it clear that the system sets the conditions for poor recordkeeping. Individual workers are not the issue. High demand, organisational anxiety and risk logic shape the record at every stage, and these pressures have continued despite years of recommendations. Decades of recommendations have not shifted this. People are writing records inside a system that makes careful, child-centred documentation difficult to achieve.

This zine stays with those conditions to show the everyday pressures clearly enough that the conversation can move past diagnosis. The entries focus on how records are actually produced, the forces that distort them and the places where workers try to create better practice inside messy systems.

Nothing here claims to offer a fix. The point is to create a clearer view of the terrain so future efforts to shift the system are grounded in what the work is actually like, not in abstract policy language. Change becomes possible when the system pays attention to the conditions described here and treats them as structural rather than incidental.



2025