

Part 6: System supporting capacities

Chapter 16:

A workforce that delivers quality services

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Key points

- The child protection and family services workforce operates in a complex environment, dealing with some of the most difficult and complex cases of serious child abuse and neglect.
- Different components of the workforce contribute to protecting vulnerable children. They include:
 - a government workforce that is primarily focused on statutory child protection;
 - a community sector workforce that delivers a range of out-of-home care and intensive family services;
 - volunteers and households that support the family services activities and provide the vital foster and kinship care segments of the out-of-home care system; and
 - a wide range of other professions that interact with vulnerable children.
- While there are different issues affecting these components of the workforce, there is a set of key common issues that affect the workforce, including:
 - the need for increased skills and professional development;
 - the need to address issues with recruitment and retention; and
 - the need for clear pay structure and career pathways.
- There are a number of ongoing policy developments that may address some of the issues affecting the child protection and family services workforce, including reforms to the Department of Human Services structure of statutory child protection services and the equal remuneration case currently before Fair Work Australia.
- The Inquiry considers that a number of workforce issues can be addressed by improving the professionalisation of the child protection workforce via a process that is qualification-led.
- Two recommendations are made in relation to the education and professional development needs of the workforce, including the need for a training body to oversee development of an industry-wide workforce education and development strategy and the need for greater cultural competence training.

16.1 Introduction

The child protection and family services workforce deals with some of the most difficult and confronting cases of serious child abuse and neglect. They work with families with complex and often multiple problems. By its nature, the work they undertake can be disturbing, stressful and at times threatening, and it is in these circumstances that workers are expected to exercise a high degree of expertise, skill, and judgment. The work undertaken by the child protection and family services workforce is important, and when done effectively, it can have a significant effect on the lives of the children and families they work with, as well as the general health of the community.

The Inquiry had extensive consultation across Victoria with the child protection and family services workforce. It clearly emerged that there are many members of the child protection and family services workforce who are dedicated and committed to meeting the needs of vulnerable children and their families. Many positive and constructive outcomes are achieved, often unacknowledged and unpublished. It is also true that there have been serious failures and lapses by some who work in the sector, sometimes with tragic results. This Inquiry addresses ways of sustaining the good work performed by the workforce across Victoria, and of minimising the failures that have occurred.

Child protection and family services is not a normal labour market. The demands on individuals are dictated by often unexpected changes in the circumstances of the families they are working with. To be effective at protecting vulnerable children from the impacts of abuse and neglect, the child protection and family services workforce requires exceptional support from organisations that recognise the difficulties inherent with this kind of work and support the workforce accordingly. It is also reliant on the contribution made by the volunteer workforce, particularly those who work as carers for children in home-based care.

16.2 The child protection and family services workforce

The child protection and family services workforce includes both the government and non-government or community sectors. The government component of the workforce is employed by the Department of Human Services (DHS) and mainly supports the delivery of the statutory child protection program. The non-government or community sector component of the workforce is typically employed in community service organisations (CSOs) that are funded to deliver child protection and family services, including out-of-home care and intensive family services.

There is no industry classification unique to the child protection and family services sector, meaning that information on the sector workforce is often not readily available. Based on the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), both the government and the non-government components of the workforce would most likely fall into the categories of 'Other Residential Care Services' and 'Other Social Assistance Services', but these classifications also include a broader range of social services, for example community mental health, some drug and alcohol services and relationship counselling (ABS & Statistics New Zealand 2006, pp. 348-349).

Based on information provided by DHS, the Inquiry estimates that the total child protection and family services workforce in Victoria is in the order of 3,000-4,000 people. The following sections provide a discussion of the government and non-government components of the workforce.

Beyond the specific child protection and family services workforce there is also a much broader workforce that contributes to the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children. This broader workforce includes:

- Health and allied health professionals, including doctors, nurses, midwives, psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists and dentists;
- Education professionals, including primary and secondary teachers, principals and early childhood education providers;
- Legal and law enforcement professionals, including lawyers, police and the judiciary;
- Salaried and non-salaried carers; and
- Providers of social and family services.

The large and diverse number of professionals who play a role in the protection of children was highlighted in the recent Munro Review of Child Protection in the United Kingdom (UK), where a case study showed that a child may come into contact with no fewer than 46 people involved in their case within a relatively short period of time (Munro 2011a, p. 33). While the Inquiry has no similar Victorian evidence, it has heard from a number of agencies that spoke about the large number of individuals and service providers that a family may interact with.

The level of involvement that these other professions have in relation to child protection varies, some are legally required to report suspected abuse, while others interact with children who may have been the victims of abuse and neglect.

While this chapter is primarily focused on the issues facing the dedicated child protection and family services workforce in Victoria, it also considers issues facing this broader group and the role they play in protecting vulnerable children and young people.

16.3 The government workforce

The DHS employed child protection workforce consists of 1,180 full-time equivalent (FTE) child protection workers (CPWs) (June 2011). These CPWs are typically female (88 per cent) and are often relatively young, with 35 per cent aged 25 to 34 years. The workforce is structured into six levels (see Table 16.1). It is CPW-2 and CPW-3 workers who undertake the majority of case-carrying work, dealing directly with children and families. These workers make up just over 60 per cent of the total child protection workforce (see Figure 16.1).

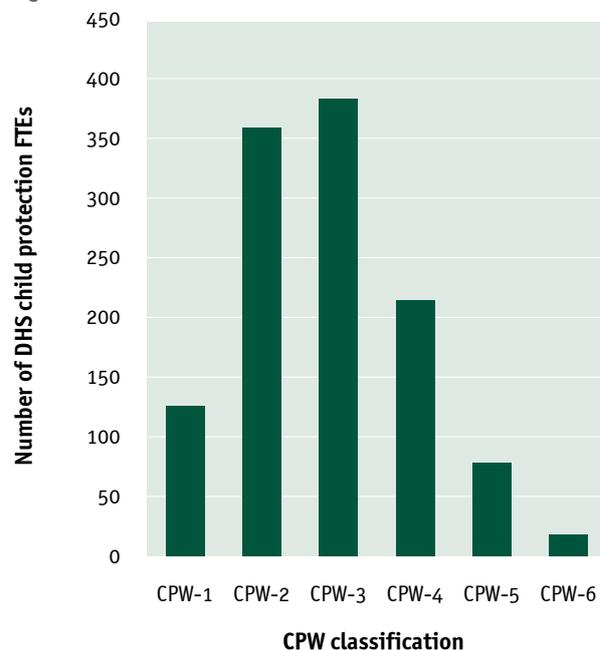
All DHS CPWs are tertiary qualified, with the exception of CPW-1 workers. The typical qualifications held by the workforce include Bachelor of Social Work, Diploma of Child Welfare or Bachelor of Psychology, with the Bachelor of Social Work being the most commonly held qualification. All graduates must have completed a practical component in their degree to be eligible for employment in child protection. Although tertiary qualified, the DHS case-carrying child protection workforce has not typically been employed in their roles for a long period of time. Historically high levels of turnover mean that 45 per cent of case-carrying workers have less than two years of experience in their roles, while only 23 per cent have greater than five years' experience.

Table 16.1 DHS child protection workforce: classifications and roles

Classification	Role (typical only)
CPW-1	Support role, non case-carrying
CPW-2	Entry level, case-carrying
CPW-3	Experienced case-carrying
CPW-4	Team leaders and specialists
CPW-5	Unit manager
CPW-6	Child protection manager

Source: Information provided by DHS

Figure 16.1 DHS child protection workforce, by classification, June 2011



Source: Information provided by DHS

The DHS child protection workforce is distributed between the eight DHS regions, including three metropolitan and five rural regions. Overall, 63 per cent of CPWs are located in the metropolitan regions, with the remaining 37 per cent in the rural regions (see Figure 16.2).

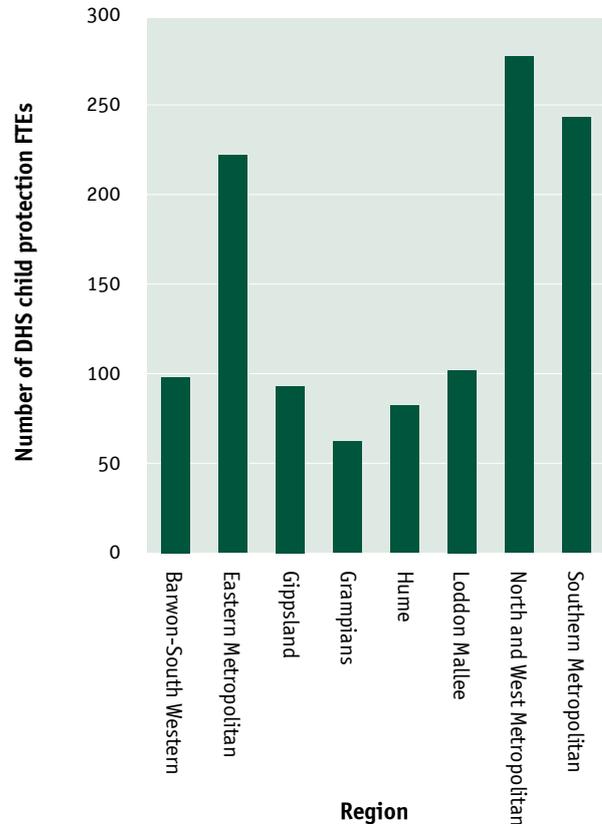
There has been significant growth in the DHS child protection workforce in recent years. Over the past five years the workforce has been growing by around 5 per cent per annum, resulting in an increase in the total number of FTEs of 26 per cent from June 2006 to June 2011. In absolute terms, this resulted in an additional 241 CPW FTEs in 2011, compared with 2006.

The majority of the increase in DHS child protection FTEs between 2006 and 2011 has been in the CPW-1, CPW-3 and CPW-4 classifications, while there has been a slight decline in the number of CPW-2 FTEs (see Figure 16.3).

Overall, between June 2006 and June 2011, the DHS case-carrying workforce (CPW-2 and CPW-3 levels) increased by 17 per cent but declined as a proportion of the total child protection workforce from 68 per cent to 63 per cent. To compare this with increases in child protection activity, over approximately the same time there has been a 27 per cent increase in child protection reports, a 16 per cent increase in investigations and 13 per cent decline in substantiations (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2011c, Table 15A.5). Caseloads and the capacity of the statutory system are discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.

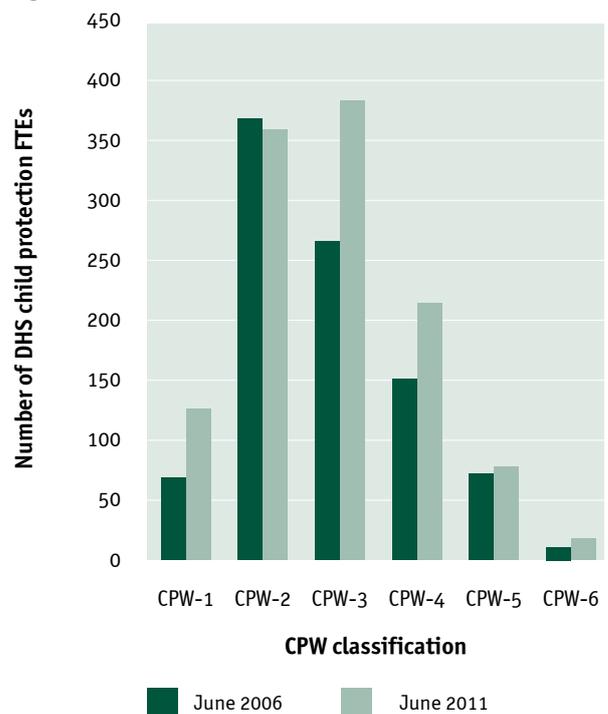
On a regional basis, the largest increases in CPW FTEs between 2006 and 2011 were in the three metropolitan regions, while the largest proportional increases have been in the Southern Metropolitan Region (39 per cent), Hume (37 per cent) and Grampians (33 per cent) (see Figure 16.4 and Table 16.2). Additional resources are generally allocated by DHS based on need using a variety of indicators. Resource allocation is discussed in more detail in Chapter 19.

Figure 16.2 DHS child protection workforce, by region, June 2011



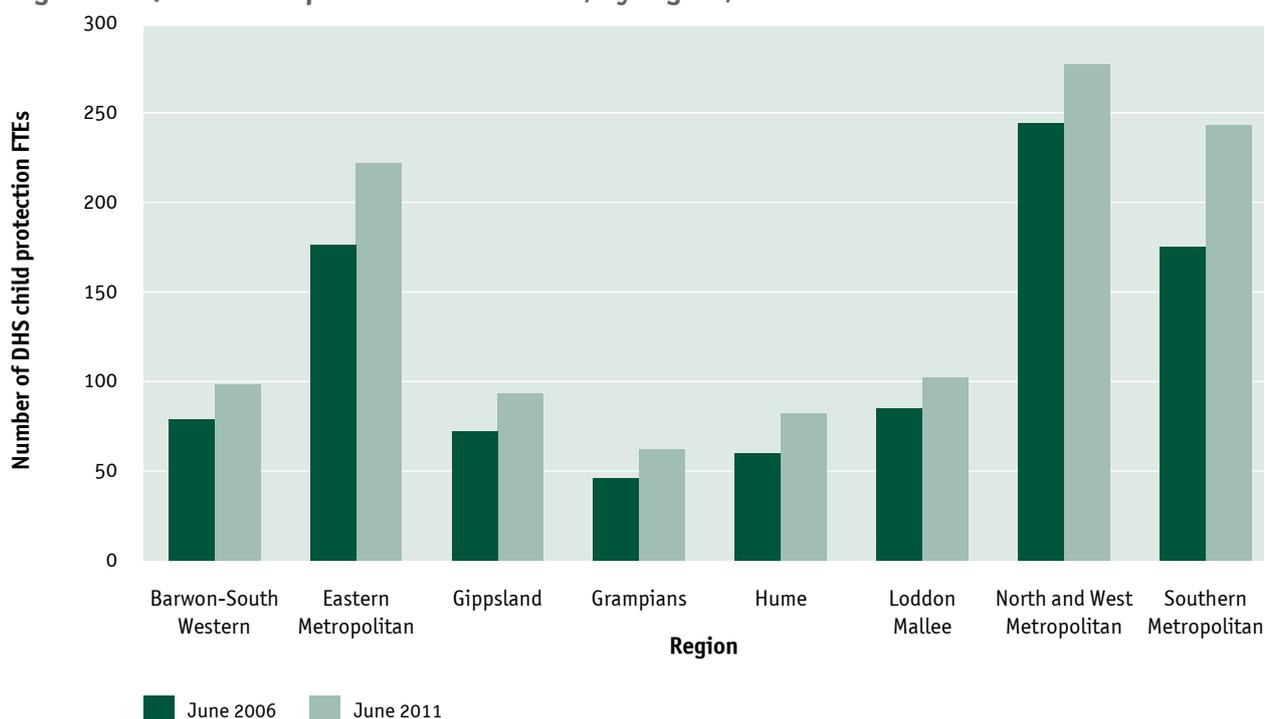
Source: Information provided by DHS

Figure 16.3 DHS child protection workforce, by classification, June 2006 and June 2011



Source: Information provided by DHS

Figure 16.4 DHS child protection workforce, by region, June 2006 and June 2011



Source: Information provided by DHS

Table 16.2 DHS child protection workforce by region, June 2006 to June 2011

Region	DHS child protection FTEs						
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Change 2006 to 2011
Barwon-South Western	79	84	80	87	84	98	23%
Eastern Metropolitan	176	190	189	205	206	222	26%
Gippsland	72	70	82	79	95	93	29%
Grampians	46	50	49	44	54	62	33%
Hume	60	62	67	71	90	82	37%
Loddon Mallee	85	104	101	106	96	102	19%
North and West Metropolitan	244	248	247	271	246	277	14%
Southern Metropolitan	175	194	220	192	229	243	39%
Total*	938	1,002	1,036	1,055	1,100	1,179	26%

Source: Information provided by DHS

* Figures may not sum due to rounding

16.3.1 Recruitment

The DHS child protection recruitment program operates on a monthly cycle for the recruitment of entry-level CPWs and advertises more senior positions as they become available. For entry-level positions, which account for the majority of child protection recruitment, the recruitment process takes approximately six weeks from date of advertisement to a formal offer of employment. The recruitment of CPWs may be coordinated centrally or at the regional level, in response to particular recruitment needs of a region. The Inquiry was made aware during the course of the consultations of the difficulty of attracting quality candidates in non-metropolitan areas.

DHS advertises for the recruitment of CPWs through a variety of channels, including newspapers, internet and social media.

DHS also provides a Student Placement Program, which provides tertiary-level students with an introduction to child protection work and acts as a significant source of supply to entry-level positions in child protection. In 2010, 181 students participated in the Student Placement Program, most of who were in the final year of study. At the conclusion of their placement, 30 of these students participated in an end-of-placement survey. These students were generally positive about a career in child protection, the majority of them had applied for a child protection practitioner position (56 per cent), or intended to apply in the future (39 per cent). Students were positive about a career in child protection for reasons, including:

- Working directly with families;
- The opportunity to develop interpersonal skills in high conflict/emotion situations; and
- Exposure to a range of practice interventions (DHS 2010c, pp. 2-6).

Since 1989 DHS has also conducted several recruitment campaigns aimed at attracting CPWs from overseas. This includes a centralised campaign in 2008 and 2009 attracting advanced practitioners from the UK and Ireland and a 2010 campaign organised by the Gippsland region aiming to address that region's specific recruitment and retention issues.

Overseas recruitment programs have been conducted in the UK, Ireland, Canada and New Zealand, and overseas employed candidates are primarily from these countries. A small number of CPWs have also been employed from the United States and South Africa.

The precise retention rate for overseas recruits is not available; however, according to DHS 186 CPWs have been recruited from overseas since 2008, with 138 currently employed. This would suggest that around three-quarters of overseas recruits have been retained in child protection, which is relatively high when compared with attrition rates in the sector.

Overseas recruitment, including travel relocation packages, marketing and administration, has cost DHS \$1.64 million since 2008, equivalent to \$8,800 per recruit. DHS has advised the Inquiry that the attraction and retention of domestic workers is the primary focus of child protection recruitment but that overseas recruited staff are likely to remain a small but consistent source of experienced practitioners for the Victorian child protection workforce.

16.3.2 Professional education and development

All case-carrying CPWs in the government sector are degree-qualified. There are also a range of professional education and development opportunities available to the government child protection and family services workforce, coordinated by DHS at the certificate, graduate and post graduate level, as well as other internal education and development programs. Some of these programs are also available to members of the non-government workforce within the CSO sector.

DHS provides three main streams of professional education and development, primarily for the government workforce. They are:

- Beginning Child Protection Practice;
- Advanced Child Protection Practice; and
- Leading Child Protection Practice.

Beginning Child Protection Practice

The Beginning Child Protection Practice program is provided to new entry-level practitioners and covers the first 18 months of practice. The program is also available to new child protection practitioners who enter the child protection workforce at advanced practitioner or team leader level. The program consists of three mandatory courses:

- Beginning Practice Clinics (formally known as Beginning Practice in Child Protection);
- The Prevention and Management of Occupational Violence; and
- Attachment Development and Trauma.

The Beginning Child Protection Practice program includes four days (out of a total of 12) dedicated to court processes. It aims to develop an understanding of the role of CPWs in a legal context. These sessions are provided by DHS, a DHS lawyer, a representative from Victorian Legal Aid (VLA) and a barrister. The training is also open to VLA lawyers.

Legal training for CPWs also includes preparation for Children's Court matters, as well as assessment of and intervention in child sexual abuse. The former is designed to provide a practical understanding of the roles and responsibilities of CPWs when interacting with the judicial system, while the latter is intended to provide an understanding of evidence required for the Children's Court regarding a sexual abuse investigation.

It is essential that CPWs receive relevant and sufficient training in court processes, both to assist the court and to equip them with knowledge of court processes and procedures. As discussed in section 16.5.2, court processes are an area of concern for many CPWs.

Advanced Child Protection Practice

The Advanced Child Protection Practice program is delivered with the intention of maintaining and further extending the training program for experienced practitioners. Training sessions are facilitated by the Child Protection Youth Justice Program Development Unit, in the form of full-day training in specific areas of practice, for example court skills.

Leading Child Protection Practice

The Leading Child Protection Practice program is provided for senior child protection workers in the roles of team leader, unit manager, child protection managers or specialist roles. Workers in these roles can also access the Advanced Child Protection Practice stream. It is compulsory for team leaders to undertake team leadership and supervision training (which also includes a court component), while other training is not mandatory but is highly recommended. The training is based on the *Child Protection Capability Framework* (DHS 2011d).

Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma courses

In 2009 DHS provided funding for the development of two graduate-level courses delivered by La Trobe University, namely:

- Graduate Certificate in Child and Family Practice; and
- Graduate Diploma in Child and Family Practice Leadership.

The goals of the courses are to enhance the quality of practice with vulnerable children and families and to further develop the professionalism of the workforce by integrating theoretical frameworks and research into practice. DHS anticipated the courses would improve staff retention and the perception of the Victorian community services sector as an attractive career choice.

The Inquiry received a joint submission by Associate Professor Frederico at La Trobe University, The University of Melbourne, Take Two Berry Street Victoria and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. The submission stated that both courses provide the opportunity for the child protection and family services workforce to upgrade skills, enhance reflective practice, prevent burnout and further develop a professional career. The courses provide exposure to a range of specialised knowledge areas that are relevant to child protection and family services work, including substance abuse, social work, family therapy, trauma, attachment, developmental psychology and neuropsychology (Frederico et al. submission, p. 2).

The courses first began in the second semester of 2009. Both courses have had strong retention rates. In the case of the Graduate Certificate, 27 of the 30 students enrolled graduated in June 2010, including 17 child protection practitioners, nine family service workers and one Aboriginal community controlled organisation (ACCO) worker. In the case of the Graduate Diploma, 30 of the initial 35 continued to the second year of the course, including 20 child protection team leaders or unit managers and 10 from family service organisations or ACCOs (Frederico et al. submission, p. 1).

An evaluation of the course provided to the Inquiry found that participation in the courses led to enhanced confidence and greater competence to operate as a front line case practitioner in child protection or family services as well as enhanced confidence and competence as a leader. The participation of both government and non-government workers was found to lead to a greater appreciation of their respective roles and responsibilities (Frederico et al. submission, p. 3).

Currently there are 31 students enrolled for the 2011 to 2012 intake of the Graduate Certificate course, and a further 31 students are enrolled for the 2011 to 2013 intake of the Graduate Diploma course. At present, neither of these training courses have recurrent funding.

The DHS Child Protection Capabilities Framework

The DHS *Child Protection Capabilities Framework* outlines the capabilities required to work within the statutory system, as well as the knowledge and skills required for child protection work. The capabilities identified by DHS include:

- Thinking clearly;
- Engaging others;
- Managing oneself;
- Delivering results; and
- Leading and inspiring.

The capabilities framework is incorporated into *Leading practice: A resource guide for Child Protection frontline and middle managers*.

16.4 The community sector workforce

There is generally less information available on the non-government, community sector workforce. This is partly due to the fragmentation of the sector. In 2009-10 there were 221 organisations that received funding from DHS to deliver child protection and family welfare services, ranging from multi-million dollar organisations to small volunteer organisations with no paid staff.

DHS does not collect information about the community sector workforce but provided the Inquiry with estimates of the size of the workforce, as being in the order of 2,000 people based on approximately 1,200 staff in out-of-home care and 700 FTEs working in Integrated Family Services. Although this figure is only an estimate, it suggests that the non-government child protection and family services workforce is in the order of 50 per cent larger than the government child protection workforce.

At the end of June 2011, there were 900 households providing foster care and 1,700 kinship care households. Many of these households were caring for more than one child or young person. As discussed in Chapter 10, Victoria does not operate a system of professional foster care where carers are paid a salary. As a consequence foster carers and kinship carers are generally not included in official workforce data or in surveys. Issues affecting foster and kinship carers are discussed further in Chapter 10.

As noted above the community sector workforce mainly delivers out-of-home care and family services. Like the government workforce, the non-government workforce is predominantly female (78 per cent) (ABS 2010a) but is typically older and more experienced than the government workforce, with a median age of 44 (Australian Services Union submission, p. 7).

Due to the fragmentation of the community sector workforce, information on the level of qualifications held by these workers is not readily available; however, based on figures for the broader community services sector, around 80 per cent hold some qualification, with 21 per cent being degree qualified (ABS 2010a).

A range of professional education and development programs are available to the community sector workforce (including some of the ones previously mentioned for the government workforce). Much of the training specifically provided to the non-government workforce by DHS is provided in the out-of-home care sector, relating to either residential or home-based care.

Residential care training and professional development

The level of training for workers in the residential care sector was frequently raised as an issue in submissions and during consultations, with many commenting that the most troubled children (those in residential care) are left in the care of the least qualified workers. The Inquiry has had difficulty sourcing up-to-date information on the qualifications of community sector workers generally; however, a study of these qualifications from 2006 would seem to confirm this assertion.

The study found that, while nine per cent of family services workers had no further qualification beyond secondary school, this figure rose to 24 per cent for residential care workers. Residential care workers were also less likely than other family services workers to have completed diploma or degree qualifications (DHS 2006b, p. 2 & appendix 1). In addition, issues with the recruitment of residential care workers have often led to the use of agency-based staff with minimal qualifications and experience.

Training for residential care is coordinated through the *Residential Care Learning and Development Strategy* (RCLDS). Recurrent funding for the strategy is currently around \$520,000. Management of the strategy is contracted to the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. The RCLDS has enabled CSOs and DHS to use the *Australian National Training Framework* to design and deliver competency based training to non-government, residential care workers.

Between 2008–09 and 2010–11 approximately 2,000 residential care workers participated in courses through the RCLDS. Training courses provided under the strategy are typically run for one to two days, with topics including:

- Youth mental health;
- Supervision skills for residential care managers;
- Conflict management;
- Managing sexually abusive behaviours; and
- Therapeutic care, including trauma and attachment theory.

Home-based care training and professional development

DHS provides home-based care training separately from the RCLDS. This training consists of mandatory training in foster care assessment, as well as training for a therapeutic approach to care. Table 16.3 outlines this training, and the funding allocated in 2010–11.

In relation to home-based care training, a major CSO observed that, ‘while the RCLDS had been successful in the residential care setting, there is no equivalent ... for home based care staff and volunteers’ (MacKillop Family Services submission, p. 17).

Chapter 10 discussed the need for more specialised therapeutic provision, training and support for out-of-home care staff and carers.

16.5 Issues raised in consultations and submissions

The Inquiry consulted on issues affecting the child protection and family services workforce with frontline workers from DHS and CSOs drawn from metropolitan and regional locations. A summary of these consultations is contained in Chapter 5.

The consultations revealed a high level of commitment from child protection and family services workforce in both the government and CSO sectors. When asked about the best parts of the job, workers from both sectors often cited ‘working with families’, ‘facilitating change with those families’ or the ‘satisfaction of making a difference’ (Inquiry workforce consultation).

The high level of workforce commitment to children and their families is well established. Surveys of the child protection workforce from 2010 show that ‘making a difference’ and ‘working with children’ were the main reasons for workers entering child protection (Hall & Partners 2010, p. 2).

In spite of this high level of commitment, the consultations with frontline workers revealed a number of common issues facing both the government and non-government workforce (Inquiry frontline worker consultation). These issues include:

- High caseloads;
- Difficulties with court processes;
- The challenge of working with difficult and complex families;
- The need for a defined career path and more training; and
- Difficulty with the administrative burden of their work.

Table 16.3 Home-based care and out-of-home care: training and funding, Victoria, 2010–11

Program	Funding 2010–11
Mandatory staff training in foster carer assessment, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream foster care; • Aboriginal foster care; and • Development of materials for the above. 	\$99,000
‘A therapeutic approach to care’, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream kinship care training; • Aboriginal kinship care training; and • Development of materials for the above. 	\$655,000
Total	\$754,000

Source: Information provided by DHS

High caseloads

Caseloads were commonly raised as a significant issue for DHS and CSO frontline workers, with the perception that high caseloads were contributing to worker burnout and fatigue. CSO workers reported that they were being ‘pushed’ by DHS to take cases, while workers from both sectors raised the issue of balancing caseloads with the other tasks expected of child protection and family services workers, such as administration and court attendance. Consultation with DHS and CSO workers from regional Victoria revealed additional demand pressures associated with travelling large distances to visit clients or attend court proceedings.

The Inquiry was provided with information about the average caseload of DHS child protection workers from October 2009 to September 2011. The calculations provided to the Inquiry exclude non case-carrying workers, such as managers or intake workers. Since late 2009 there has slight decline in the average caseload, from around 13.5 to just over 12 cases per CPW, as shown in Figure 16.5.

There is considerable regional variation in the average caseload per region, as shown in Figure 16.6. The Barwon-South Western, Loddon Mallee and Gippsland regions had comparatively high average caseloads. An analysis of this variation showed that regional differences in average caseloads were persistent from October 2009 to September 2011.

Average caseloads are influenced by a number of factors, including recruitment and retention patterns and the experience profile of the regional workforce. They are also influenced by the mix of cases and the phase of those cases.

DHS was not able to provide the Inquiry with a distribution of caseloads for individual staff; however, they advised that these caseloads are influenced by workers’ level of experience, where less experienced workers are allocated fewer cases, and also by the resource intensiveness of cases.

The Inquiry also heard evidence of further regional differences in workloads as a result of providing after-hours services. A major issue raised during workforce consultations was the pressure to perform after-hours work in some non-metropolitan regions. The Inquiry heard that staff in some regions may be required for after-hours work, including on-call work, which may involve travelling lengthy distances. At times when staff are required to attend court the following morning they may have had little or no sleep. The after-hours on-call system was described during consultations as particularly burdensome and potentially dangerous for staff in rural areas where there was no dedicated after-hours service. This issue was not as prevalent in the metropolitan regions, which are covered by a dedicated after-hours service.

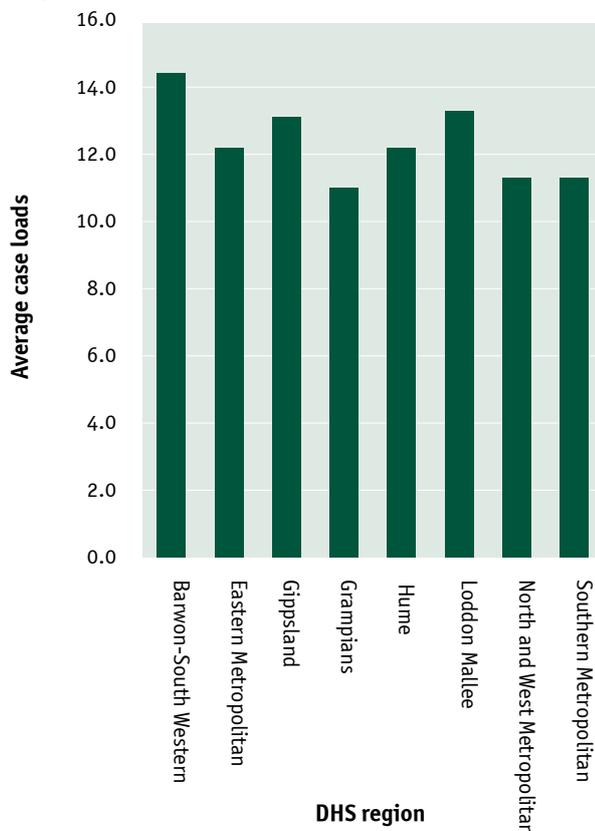
Chapter 9 discusses the capacity of the system in more detail, with reference to the workforce and other measures of capacity.

Figure 16.5 Average caseloads of child protection workers, Victoria, October 2009 to September 2011



Source: Information provided by DHS

Figure 16.6 Average caseloads of child protection workers, by region, year to September 2011



Source: Information provided by DHS

Difficulties with court processes

Workers, particularly frontline workers from DHS, consistently nominated issues around court processes as being one of the greatest difficulties they experience at work. At consultations with frontline workers, they frequently expressed a belief that CPWs' assessments are undervalued by some magistrates and lawyers and there is a lack of respect for the profession of CPWs. On the evidence presented to the Inquiry, this view was more likely to be held in metropolitan areas than rural ones.

The amount of time frontline DHS workers spend preparing for and attending court, including frequently for cases that are adjourned, was also raised during consultations. There is a perception from workers that these processes required them to take more time than is necessary away from assisting children and families. Similarly, feedback from CSO workers revealed frustration that Children's Court Clinic assessments were being given precedence in court over a foster care worker's assessment. These workers felt they had greater familiarity with the child or family and this should be fully considered by the court.

Some of these frustrations seemed to demonstrate a misunderstanding of the role of the CPWs in the court setting. This may reflect insufficient training for the workforce in court processes. The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), in its submission to the Inquiry, reported a number of complaints from CPWs about the lack of time they spend in training, and the impact this has on covering important topics such as court or the *Children Youth and Families Act 2005* (CPSU submission, p. 18).

The Inquiry recognises that interactions with the courts are a significant issue for the child protection workforce and issues relating to court processes have therefore been given substantial consideration. The Inquiry has made several recommendations in this area, outlined in Chapter 15. The Inquiry also considers that more accredited professional education for CPWs to assist them with preparing for and attending court would increase the workforce's understanding of court processes and reduce the frustrations that the workforce experiences in this area.

Administrative burden

The amount of administrative work required by frontline workers from both DHS and the CSOs was also an issue raised frequently during workforce consultations. Several examples were provided, with one worker noting that kinship care referrals require the same data to be entered into three separate databases, while another worker reported that there were seven databases relating to foster care. An excessive amount of time spent on administrative tasks is seen as taking workers' time away from clients.

Frustration with DHS systems and processes was also raised in submissions. In relation to one key DHS system (the Client Relationship Information System or CRIS), the CPSU noted that workers have struggled to use the technology and that DHS had not factored sufficient training or sufficient time into the implementation of the system (CPSU submission, p. 18).

Career path and professional education and development

Concerns about career paths, as well as a lack of professional education and development opportunities for workers in child protection and family services, were a major issue raised in consultations with frontline workers. Participants felt that pay in the sector was low and that career progression usually involves 'moving away from direct client work'. This was particularly the case for CSO workers, who felt their pay was generally lower than DHS workers.

While mentoring is available for inexperienced workers, there was a perception that more could be done in this area, in particular to help workers ‘debrief’ about the personal impact of their work. There was a mixed perception of the Bachelor of Social Work, with some participants feeling that the qualification does not sufficiently prepare graduates for the specialised field of child protection. Some suggestions for improved training opportunities raised during the consultations included:

- More specific training for court attendances;
- Greater use of mentoring programs for inexperienced workers; and
- More training in risk management.

Consistent with the feedback from the workforce consultations, some CSOs submitted that a perceived lack of career path was a major issue affecting workforce retention. For example:

Presently there is not a career path for the workforce in family services and out-of-home care. The model of skilled practitioners that exist [5] in education doesn’t in our sector. There are no higher levels according to qualifications and expertise that allows for staff to remain in the program (Upper Murray Family Care submission, p. 4).

Workers in the SACS [Social and Community Services] industry experience limited career paths and this is often cited as a reason for leaving the industry (Australian Services Union submission, p. 17).

The St Luke’s Anglicare submission argued that workforce development was a key issue facing the non-government sector and this required serious resourcing and planning:

We need a practitioner stream that staff can advance through, incentives and encouragement for staff to remain as practitioners and ensure staff are well remunerated for this professional decision (p. 26).

Further issues

In addition to the issues mentioned above, the public perception of CPWs in the statutory system was an issue frequently raised in consultation with DHS workers. Workers felt there was an ‘unrealistic community perception of workers’ and that media attention was solely focused on ‘when things have gone horribly wrong’.

In addition to feeling under-valued by the courts, frontline CPWs frequently spoke of issues with the way the public value their work, and the sometimes adversarial nature of dealing with vulnerable children and families. This view was reiterated in submissions, for example, Odyssey House Victoria’s submission reported that focus groups had found parents reporting mutual distrust with child protection and difficulties working with the service (p. 4).

Frontline CSO workers from both the regional and metropolitan consultations identified the collaboration they have with other agencies as one of the best parts of ‘the job’. However, CSO workers expressed concern that DHS is sometimes slow to take action when they have identified a risk to one of their clients and that the level of inexperience of many DHS workers and high levels of turnover was seen as creating additional challenges for the relationship between DHS and CSOs.

16.6 Key issues, observations and recommendations

Based on the evidence presented above, the Inquiry has identified the following three categories of issues affecting the workforce:

- Skills and development;
- Recruitment and retention; and
- Pay structure and career pathways.

These issues and the Inquiry’s observations and recommendations are discussed below.

16.6.1 Skills and development

Identifying and recognising the skills and development needs of the child protection and family services workforce is required to ensure the delivery of quality services and also to improving the overall professionalisation of the sector.

The Inquiry shares the view presented in a number of submissions that there is a need to improve the professionalisation of the child protection workforce and that this process should be qualification-led (Frederico et al. p. 1; Ms Johns, p. 1; Take Two Partnership, p. 4). Increased professionalisation will have a number of benefits, including enhanced standing before the court as an expert witness.

While there are a number of education and professional development programs available to the government and community sector workforce, currently these programs are not coordinated with the overall needs of the sector and are not always mindful of the intersection between their roles. There is presently no overarching workforce education and development strategy for the child protection and family services sector. This point was highlighted in the joint submission from Anglicare Victoria, Berry Street, MacKillop Family Services, The Salvation Army, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (Joint CSO submission):

There has never been a comprehensive overview study of the role and responsibilities of the child protection workforce and/or the community sector workforce, no assessment or consideration of their intersecting roles and the consequences of this for requisite skills, further skill development, training or career structure, salary levels, and employment conditions.

Given the increasing collaborative nature of the work undertaken by both sectors, we believe the time has come for a comprehensive workforce strategy (p. 83).

The Inquiry supports the recommendation put by The Salvation Army, which identifies the need to establish a training body to 'ensure that training is relevant across the human services sector' and to coordinate the training provided by a range of registered training organisations (RTOs), Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes, universities and industry providers (The Salvation Army submission, p. 27). In addition, the Inquiry has identified several areas where there is a need for additional workforce training and development. These are outlined below.

Supporting increased training for carers

In Chapter 10, the Inquiry recommended that the government establish a comprehensive plan for Victoria's out-of-home care system. Chapter 10 also identified the need for significant investment in the funding and support arrangements for out-of-home care, including mandating training and skill requirements for residential care workers as part of an overall move towards increasing the overall professionalisation of the out-of-home care system.

Addressing the need for increased education and training for carers, as described in Chapter 10, should be a priority of the recommended training body described above. This should include opportunities for foster, kinship and residential carers to participate in further training.

Training for professions that interact with vulnerable children

This chapter identifies a much broader workforce that contributes to the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children. This workforce includes a diverse range of professionals from the health, education, legal and other sectors, who, in the course of their work, are likely to come into contact with vulnerable children and families.

The Inquiry recognises the important role that this broader workforce plays in protecting vulnerable children. In Chapter 14 the Inquiry recommended that the Government expand mandatory reporting requirements to include a broader range of professions named in the CYF Act that are not yet mandated. Not all of these professions are adequately skilled to fulfil this expanded role, for example, psychologists are not likely to have undertaken any specific units of study in the prevention, identification and professional response to child abuse and neglect (Crettenden et al. 2010, p. 1).

There is a need to identify the education and training requirements of the broader range of professionals who interact with vulnerable children and determine their ability and any training and development requirements for identifying and responding to child abuse and neglect. This training should also be made available to other professionals who come into contact with vulnerable children and families.

Recommendation 67

The Government should establish a child and family welfare sector training body to oversee development of an industry-wide workforce education and development strategy. This strategy should focus on consolidating the number of separate training budgets and strategies relating to child protection and family services.

This body should focus on:

- Developing the professionalism of the sector;
- Providing opportunities for continuing professional education including training and career path opportunities for workers entering at the Child Protection Worker-1 level;
- Addressing the education and training needs of the out-of-home care sector including carers;
- Overseeing and evaluating current training and development efforts, with an initial emphasis on assessing the adequacy of the Beginning Practice training offered to new child protection workers;
- Ensuring relevant training is consistent with national training frameworks and appropriately accredited;

- Identifying opportunities for providing combined training to government child protection workers, the community sector workforce and other professions;
- Coordinating the delivery of internal Department of Human Services courses;
- Procurement of other courses from external providers; and
- Collaborating with professional bodies and universities in disciplines that interact with vulnerable children to develop curriculum content relevant to the prevention of and response to child abuse and neglect.

The training body should be established as a public entity, with dedicated funding and staffing resources and governed by a board drawn from the government and non-government sector. It should be led by an independent chair with expertise related to the professional education and training needs of the sector.

Increasing the cultural competence of the child protection workforce

The Inquiry considered issues specific to Aboriginal children and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Chapters 12 and 13 respectively. Chapter 13 of this Report highlights the importance of culturally competent service provision and the need to improve cultural competence of child protection workers through better training and education. Chapter 12 observed that fewer than half of CSOs were rated as having met the registration standards for respecting Aboriginal children and youth's cultural identity.

Chapter 13 highlighted the diverse nature of Victorian families and the large number of culturally and linguistically diverse groups, while Chapter 12 identified some of the cultural issues that are unique to working with Aboriginal families. While there is a need for all child protection and family services workers to have a level of cultural competence, it is not practical or efficient to provide the entire workforce with training that covers the breadth of cultural issues they may face. Opportunities for cultural competence training and access to cultural competence resources should therefore be made available to child protection and family services workers as they are required.

Recommendation 68

The Department of Human Services should improve the cultural competence of integrated family services and statutory child protection services, including through:

- Applying leadership accountability for culturally competent services and client satisfaction at regional service delivery level through performance agreements;
- Requiring cultural competence to be a component of all training;
- Providing culturally appropriate training, assistance and support to carers of children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the out-of-home care system;
- Encouraging local child and family services to draw links with relevant culturally and linguistically diverse communities as part of area-based planning reforms;
- Recruitment strategies to attract suitable candidates from Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds into child protection including through the use of scholarship schemes to undertake relevant tertiary-level training; and
- Exploring staff exchange and other joint learning programs on an area basis to build knowledge and respect for Aboriginal culture.

16.6.2 Recruitment and retention

Throughout the Inquiry, workforce recruitment and retention has emerged as a key issue in both the government and CSO sectors. Both of these sectors have highlighted difficulties in attracting skilled staff and retaining those staff. These can have a major impact on the delivery of child protection and family services.

Research has identified the relationship between child protection and family services workers and the families with whom they work as a key factor in protecting children and arguably the most important (Alexander 2010, p. 15).

This point has been further recognised by DHS:

No single strategy is of itself effective in protecting children. However, the most important factor contributing to success was the quality of the relationship between the child's family and the responsible professional (DHS 2011f, p. 8).

Currently, in Victoria, 43 per cent of children subject to child protection orders for less than two years experienced three to five case workers, while 39 per cent who were subject to orders for greater than two years experienced six or more case workers (DHS 2011f, p. 8).

Clearly, high turnover has an impact on the quality of care that is provided. DHS has identified that frequent changes in case worker are likely to result in suboptimal system performance, namely:

- Compromised relationships between vulnerable children and young people, their families, carers and the allocated case worker;
- Loss of detailed knowledge of the child's circumstances and family history; and
- Less than optimal case outcomes and greater likelihood of adverse incidents (DHS 2011f, p. 8).

Retention

As identified earlier, the retention of CPWs in the government sector is unacceptably low, with one in four entry-level case-carrying workers leaving every year over the past five years.

Poor workforce retention has a significant impact on Victoria's system for protecting children. It affects practitioners and team leaders, who remain responsible for the workload of a colleague who has left until a replacement can be recruited and trained. It also affects the efficiency of the system. DHS estimates that recruitment costs \$3,200 per FTE (estimate provided to the Inquiry), but this does not include significant costs associated with additional training or loss of efficiency. The low level of retention in the child protection workforce has previously been estimated

to reduce workforce productivity across the whole workforce by as much as at 15 per cent and increase the cost of program delivery by around \$5 million per annum (Boston Consulting Group 2006, p. 49).

There is less verifiable data available about retention rates in the CSO sector. This could be partly due to the fragmentation of the sector and also the difficulty separating retention rates in child and family services activities from other activities that CSOs may provide.

On the evidence that is available, there are similar difficulties with the recruitment and retention of staff in the CSO sector. One estimate of turnover, taken from the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS), in its *Annual Community Sector Survey 2011*, estimates that the average organisational turnover for child welfare services in Australia was 19 per cent but does not provide a figure for Victoria (ACOSS 2011, p. 44).

The Inquiry considered issues in relation to the child protection and family services workforce in an evolving policy context. Since the Inquiry was announced on 31 January 2011, the Minister for Community Services has released two key policy documents relating to workforce reform, *The Case for Change and Protecting Children, Changing Lives*. They are summarised below.

Retaining a quality workforce is difficult in any sector, particularly at a time of low unemployment. However, turnover rates in the child protection workforce of 25 per cent per annum are unacceptably high, and attempts to improve retention should be considered.

The Case for Change

The Case for Change was released in June 2011. Recognising the important role that the child protection workforce plays in protecting vulnerable children and families, *The Case for Change* draws on exit studies, workforce surveys and an independent evaluation of an alternative operating model in the Eastern Metropolitan Region to build the evidence base for reform of the child protection workforce.

Some key findings presented in *The Case for Change* include:

- There are many strengths of the child protection workforce, including an extremely high level of commitment to the work by current staff, rising levels of postgraduate qualifications and a commitment to continuous improvement through professional development; and
- That staff turnover in the child protection workforce is unacceptably high, with one in four entry-level workers leaving every year. High levels of staff turnover can compromise the client and practitioners relationship, including the loss of information of the child's circumstances and family history, increasing the risk of adverse events to the child

The Case for Change identified four critical areas for action:

1. Valuing the work and developing the professional;
2. More support for, and supervision of, frontline workers;
3. Reducing the statutory and administrative burden; and
4. Supporting staff to balance the demands of the job (DHS 2011f).

Protecting Children, Changing Lives

Following on from *The Case for Change* the Minister for Community Services released *Protecting Children, Changing Lives* in July 2011, which outlines reforms to the statutory child protection workforce model. These reforms aim to address the four critical areas for action identified in *The Case for Change*, and include changes to the existing child protection operating model, depicted in Figure 16.7.

Under the new model, practice guidance and support are intended to be provided by senior child protection practitioners, practice leaders and principal practitioners. All practice positions will also have a case-carrying component. DHS envisages that the new structure will provide less experienced practitioners with more support and better access to expert advice for complex case decisions. In particular, the principal practitioner role, of which there is to be one per region, is intended to provide child protection practitioners with more practice leadership and expert help on complex cases.

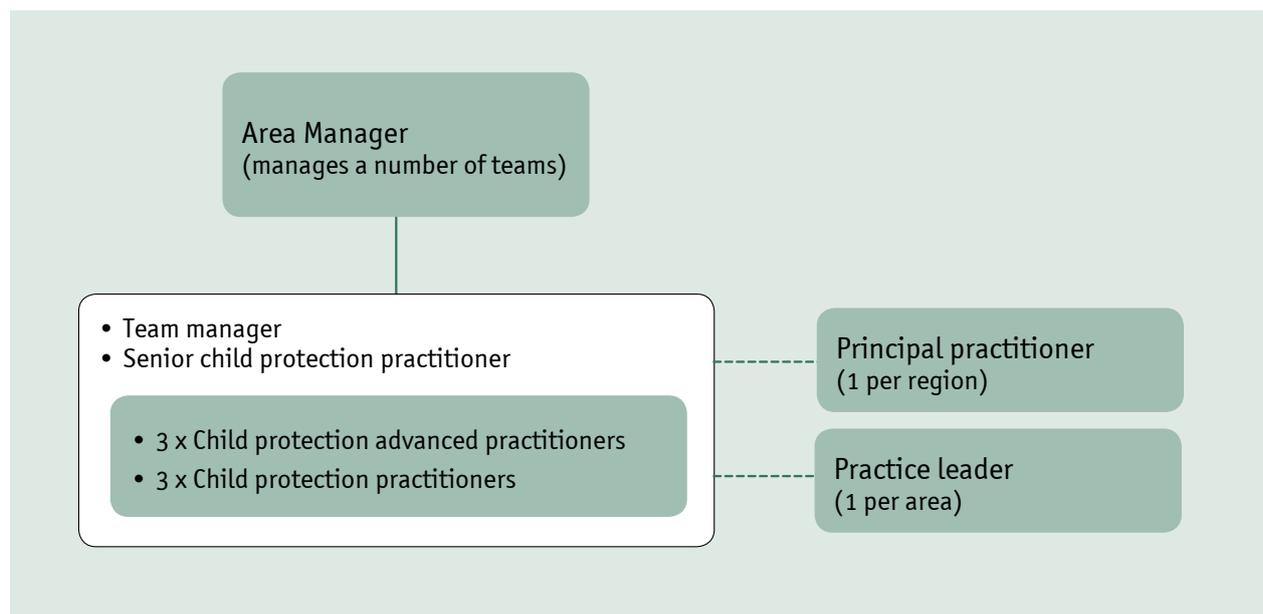
The role of senior child protection practitioner in the new structure is intended to provide better support for and more supervision of new or inexperienced child protection practitioners. Overall, the changes in workforce structure are expected to increase the involvement of senior practitioners with case work.

The new structure will result in the redeployment of a number of existing specialist roles to the roles described above. This includes existing high-risk infant specialists, adolescent specialist workers and family decision-making specialists. DHS has indicated to the Inquiry that the existing Aboriginal family decision-making specialists, community-based child protection workers and case contracting teams will be retained.

As part of *Protecting Children, Changing Lives*, DHS also proposes replacing the existing CPW structure with new classifications, known as child protection practitioners (CPPs), to more clearly define the career structure for the child protection workforce. The new CPP structure would be aligned to the Victorian public service (VPS) classifications; however, this is currently subject to the outcome of an enterprise bargaining process.

According to *Protecting Children, Changing Lives*, the changes are intended to address the reasons why staff leave child protection, including stress, lack of supervision, lack of access to professional development, and too much time spent on administrative work at the expense of working with children, young people and families.

Figure 16.7 Proposed Department of Human Services child protection operating model



Source: DHS 2011m, p. 14

Inquiry observations

The Inquiry's consultations with the DHS child protection workforce found it to be highly committed and motivated by the outcomes it achieves for clients. This is consistent with other research, for example the 2011 *Organisational Culture Survey* found 'high levels of commitment to the role and the Department', while workers consistently nominated the work they do as the thing they like most about working for DHS (Right Management 2011, pp. 17, 28).

Notwithstanding this level of commitment, the Inquiry's consultations with frontline DHS workers raised a consistent set of issues to those identified by DHS in *The Case for Change*, namely, that workers need:

- More training and development;
- More supervision and support;
- A healthier workplace culture;
- Assistance with paperwork and administration;
- Opportunities to debrief;
- Help to stabilise the demands of the job;
- More professional support;
- Less time in court; and
- More realistic perceptions of the child protection worker's role.

The workforce reforms announced by the Minister for Community Services in July 2011 will aim to address the issues impacting on retention in the government sector by:

- Creating a CPP job classification to replace the broader CPW classification, involving aligning the CPW-1 to CPW-4 levels with the VPS-2 to VPS-5 levels;
- Establishing of a 'principal practitioner' in each region;
- Funding to support 47 new practitioners and an increase in overall case carrying capacity of the workforce through changes to roles and reduced staff turnover;
- Improved pay and conditions, subject to agreement through the VPS Enterprise Agreement process; and
- A proposed new operating model for child protection, to give more support, greater flexibility, better pathways and more time with children and families.

The Inquiry acknowledges the government's work in developing *Protecting Children, Changing Lives*. These reforms are aimed at addressing a number of the workforce issues identified during the course of the Inquiry.

However, the proposed structure involves the integration of a number of previously specialist roles, for example, high-risk infant specialists, into more generic senior practice roles. As noted in Chapter 2, infants are a particularly vulnerable group who are over-represented in child protection reports. The Inquiry considers there is a need to monitor this integration closely to ensure that specialist skills are not diminished over time.

As discussed earlier, child protection and family services deal with a wide range of difficult and complex issues that may arise at any time and in an entirely unpredictable manner. As a consequence the organisational structure and workplace arrangements need to allow for significant flexibility in responding to these issues. In recent times a number of professional workforces have increasingly realigned their practices and arrangements to enable greater flexibility and effectiveness in responding to the needs of their client groups. In keeping with these trends, the Inquiry therefore considers that, in the longer term, there is a need for DHS to continue to explore and implement a range of flexible workplace practices that better responds to the needs of vulnerable children. In Chapter 10 the Inquiry has noted the limitations posed by current industrial structures in the development of salaried foster care.

Additionally, the scope of *Protecting Children, Changing Lives* only deals with issues affecting the DHS workforce and not the broader child protection and family services sector. As such, it does not propose changes based on the skills or requirements of the sector as a whole.

Matter for attention 14

The Inquiry brings to the Government's attention the need to monitor the integration of previously specialist roles into more generic senior practice roles to ensure that specialist skills are not diminished over time.

16.6.3 Pay structure and career pathways

The pay structure and career pathways available to child protection and family services workers were frequently raised in submissions and during consultations as a major issue affecting the government and community sector workforces.

The *Protecting Children, Changing Lives* reforms announced by DHS have the capacity to alleviate some of these issues in relation to the government workforce, although there are other issues that affect the community sector workforce.

While consultations and submissions revealed many issues common to the government and non-government workforce, the issue of remuneration was more frequently raised in relation to the community sector, as noted by one submission:

The existing financial incentives are inadequate and symbolically send a message that current or prospective worker skills or contribution aren't respected or valued (Youth Support and Advocacy Service submission, p. 21).

The Australian Services Union (ASU) submitted to the Inquiry evidence that wages paid in the non-government sector are below the equivalent levels in the government sector. This was using a comparison of wages paid in the non-government sector, based on the Social and Community Services Award 2000, and the public sector comparator. The ASU submitted that wage rates for social workers in the community sector are 23 per cent lower for graduate-level staff and 30 per cent lower for more experienced staff than for the comparable CPW level in the government sector (ASU submission, p. 21).

In some cases differences in the level of salary for community sector workers may be somewhat offset by beneficial salary packaging arrangements that are available to community sector workers. An estimated one-third of community sector workers utilise these arrangements, compared with 13 per cent of the overall workforce (Equal Remuneration Case 2011).

There is evidence that inadequate pay levels are a significant contributor to high turnover in the non-government workforce. For example, salary was identified in the ACOSS *Australian Community Sector Survey 2011* as the leading factor making attracting and retaining staff more difficult (68 per cent of respondents) (ACOSS 2011, p. 45). Other leading factors included job security (44 per cent) and career path (42 per cent).

Since the Inquiry was announced there have been significant developments in relation to community sector remuneration for social and community service workers through the Fair Work Australia pay equity case. The case is currently before Fair Work Australia.

Fair Work Australia Equal Remuneration Case

The case before Fair Work Australia was brought by unions seeking to correct what was argued to be a gender-based disparity between the pay of social and community service workers and employees in state and local government.

On 16 May 2011 a full bench of Fair Work Australia issued a decision that outlined its preliminary conclusions about the making of an equal remuneration order for the Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award 2010.

Fair Work Australia has preliminarily agreed that such gender-based disparities do exist in the social and community service industry and has sought further submissions from parties on the extent of changes to wage classifications needed to correct the gender bias (Equal Remuneration Case 2011).

The Equal Remuneration Case before Fair Work Australia may result in significant wage increases for non-government workers in the child protection and family services sector, potentially addressing some of the remuneration issues identified with respect to the non-government workforce. This increase, however, has the potential to have an impact on the delivery of services provided by the non-government child protection and family services workforce. Fair Work Australia did not take into account the benefits that some employees in the community sector may derive from salary packaging, as two-thirds of workers in the sector derive no benefit from this (Equal Remuneration Case 2011).

Child protection and family services delivered by the non-government sector are largely funded by the Victorian Government, as such, an increase in wages would increase the cost of delivering services provided by CSOs. In submissions to Fair Work Australia, the Commonwealth noted that 'any increase in wages for the industry could impose significant cost pressures that could have adverse impacts on service delivery' (Equal Remuneration Case 2011). A survey of CSO workers, undertaken by DHS in 2006, indicated that 55 per cent of CSO workers are covered by the Social and Community Service Award (DHS 2006b, p. 5).

In mid-November 2011 the Commonwealth Government announced that it would, with the ASU, make a submission to Fair Work Australia that argues for rates of pay that fairly and properly value social and community sector work. This was expected to affect 150,000 social and community sector workers at a cost to the Commonwealth Government of \$2 billion.

Finding 17

The Inquiry notes the potential implications for all governments of the outcome of the Equal Remuneration Case currently being finalised by Fair Work Australia.

Nonetheless, the issues being addressed by Fair Work Australia are largely separate from those that are the focus of the Inquiry's report and recommendations, namely, reforming, enhancing and expanding Victoria's policy and service response to the needs of vulnerable children and families.

16.7 Conclusion

Victoria's child protection and family services workforce operates in a demanding and stressful environment, dictated by the circumstances of the families with whom they work. The Inquiry's consultations with workers revealed a workforce that is highly dedicated but affected by a range of issues that detract from their employment and in turn affect the performance of Victoria's system for protecting children.

Ongoing developments in the sector, such as the proposed reforms to the child protection operating system and the Equal Remuneration Case currently before Fair Work Australia, may address some of these issues. However, the Inquiry has identified a general need to improve the professionalisation of the sector by increasing the level of professional education and training that is available.