Centre for Excellence
in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES ACT 2005: IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL GOVERNANCE AND SERVICE DELIVERY

Centre for Excellence
in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE IN
CHILD AND FAMILY WELFARE INC.

5/50 Market Street
Melbourne, Victoria 3000
Australia

TELEPHONE +613 9614 1577
FACSIMILE +613 9614 1774
WEBSITE www.cwav.asn.au

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Report produced by Dr Angela Murphy,
School of Behavioural and Social Sciences
and Humanities, University of Ballarat

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For more information on this report contact:
Dr. Lynette Buoy
Chief Executive Officer
Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare
5/50 Market Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000
Australia

Telephone: +61 3 9614 1577
Fax: +61 3 9614 1774
Email: admin@cwav.asn.au

Children, Youth and Families Act (2005): Implications for regional governance and service delivery

A Report Prepared by Dr Angela Murphy, School of Behavioural and Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Ballarat

September 2009

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Foreword

We take great pleasure in commending this report to you. This research is the result of a very successful collaboration between the University of Ballarat, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and eight Community Service Organisations (CSOs) across three regions in Victoria.

The original idea for the research evolved from the experience of the researcher, Dr. Angela Murphy. In 2006 and 2007 Angela worked as the Quality Practice Advisor for two of the agencies involved in the current research study; Child and Family Services, Ballarat and Lisa Lodge. She was committed to the ideal of the reforms and the reform agenda. However, through her work, she also saw first hand the service delivery and workload impacts of the compliance regime.

When Angela took up a position with the School of Behavioural and Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Ballarat, she approached the sector and asked if they would be willing to participate in an initial exploratory study through which individual and team experiences of the reform process could be examined. It was important for the sector to be able to tell their stories around the implementation of the reforms.

The ensuing research was a genuinely collaborative effort. All parties (University, the Centre and the CSOs) provided their time and energy free of charge as part of the collective commitment to better understand how changes were playing out on the ground. All agreed it was important to overtly identify the areas which needed to be addressed to enhance long term outcomes from the reform process.

It took a year from the start of discussion about the research idea to the completion of the first draft report. A short time in some respects but long enough to gain some critical insights in relation to what has happened to date and how we need to move forward into the future. The research identified that resourcing remains a critical issue for long term success and that compliance is impacting significantly on available resources, on autonomy and on worker satisfaction levels.

The findings allow us who work in the sector, to understand the depth of commitment that exists within the sector around the reforms. The research also identified the pivotal role played by the evidence based practice movement in helping to move the concept of quality away from compliance and toward best practice and innovation.

Importantly, the report develops an understanding of the need to continue and extend this commitment to research so that the sector is better able to track changes and respond proactively to emerging issues across the sector. This publication outlines the results of the first phase of the research and we are pleased to endorse it as a great outcome from an equally great collaborative process. While the CSOs involved in the research are drawn from three regions, it needs to be recognised that the identified issues apply equally well to organisations in the other regions including those in the metropolitan area.

We would like to offer our acknowledgement and thanks to all those who participated in this project and the significant contribution that they made to the findings. In particular, we would like to thank Dr. Angela Murphy whose interest and dedication made this research project possible.

Dr. Lynette Buoy
Chief Executive Officer
Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

Kevin Zibell
Chief Executive Officer
Child and Family Services Ballarat
Board President
Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

Acknowledgements

The research team from the University of Ballarat would like to thank those involved in a range of ways in this research project. Their expertise and the insights they provided have been central to building knowledge and shaping the recommendations made within this report.

Thanks also go to all the participants in this research: workers, team leaders, managers, and agency CEOs from the following participating agencies:

- Centacare, Ballarat
- Child and Family Services, Ballarat
- Lisa Lodge, Ballarat
- Wimmera Uniting Care, Horsham
- St Lukes Anglicare, Bendigo
- Bethany Community Support, Geelong
- Glastonbury Child and Family Services, Geelong
- Mackillop Family Support (Barwon)

Thanks also go to staff and member agencies from the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. These participants willingly gave their time and knowledge to enhance our understanding of the role and impact of the reform agenda on the lives of children and families and on the broader service system.

Angela Murphy
John McDonald
Raeleene Gregory

September 2009

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Executive Summary

Background and Program Overview

This is the report of the research undertaken with eight regional Community Services Organisations (CSOs) and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare of the emerging impacts of the Victorian reform agenda in the child and family welfare sector.

The study represents a structured exploration of the specific ways in which implementation of the reform agenda is impacting on CSO management and service delivery, with emphasis on regional locations.

The research framework developed focused on issues of: 1) the influence of the reforms on the maintenance of non government sector autonomy; 2) the costs of compliance to meeting the new registration requirements; 3) the emerging impact on service delivery; and, 4) the extent to which the intended enhancement of partnerships, as embedded in legislation, are being translated in the practice context.

Research Design and Methods

A series of research questions were developed for the project. These were:

- What have been the emerging impacts of the reform agenda at the management and operational level for the CSOs?
- How do new compliance requirements impact on governance and autonomy within CSOs?
- In what ways do CSOs conceptualise partnership development within the new legislative climate?
- To what extent is this conceptualisation playing out in the practice setting?

Data collection to respond to these questions was conducted between June and December 2008 and involved:

- Individual and group interviews with a total of 79 participants; CEOs, Program Managers and Team Leaders.
- Questionnaires from 85 CSO staff and 41 board of management members.
- Analysis of program documentation.
- A review of the literature.

Ethical approval appropriate for research involving individuals was gained from the University of Ballarat Human Research Ethics Committee and principles guiding the data collection and analysis process were observed to serve the best interests of all participants at each stage of the research process.

Summary for Section 3.1: A View of the Value of the Reforms

The findings specific to this section of the report were that:

- The Best Interests Framework was, in the main, assessed as a positive element of the reform process. Research participants from the Family Services area valued the consistency of practice provided by the framework and the enhanced recognition of their role that had occurred in parallel to the introduction of the Best Interests Framework. This trend was not consistently evident with Out of Home Care workers and is an area that would benefit from additional research.

- There was some indication of improved cooperative practice as a result of the reforms both within the child and family welfare services sector and across the secondary and universal service system. This process was substantially facilitated by pre-existing professional relationships providing the foundation for facilitating cooperation. Issues of discipline boundaries and organisational silos continue to create barriers to maximising the level of cooperation and service integration across the service system.

- There has been some improvement in the working relationship between CSO and DHS staff since the introduction of the reforms although some barriers to collaborative practice remain. The Community Based Child Protection Worker plays an important role in supporting links across the sector however problems relating to effective communication and appropriate information sharing remain. The differences in compliance requirements between the government and non government sector and the absence of a 'shared space' have impacted on partnership building across the sector.

  There was a view that the reform agenda had not consistently allowed for equality of input and decision making and that the barriers created by the purchaser/provider relationship remained in place, particularly at the regional level.

- It is too early in the reform process to measure the impact of the reforms in achieving enhanced service outcomes for service users. Preliminary measures provided no definitive trend relating to outcomes. There were indications that there has been some reduction in service system barriers for service users through earlier intervention and prevention. Research is required to definitively measure the service enhancement capacity of the reforms.

Summary for Section 3.2: The Impact of Compliance

Research into the impacts of compliance highlighted a number of significant key learnings. These were:

- There is a clear recognition that regulation and compliance are an important part of organisational management with service standards consistently identified as necessary, particularly within a system introducing significant changes such as those occurring through the reform agenda. This acknowledgement was tempered with concerns that standards attainment is,

in itself, promoted as the key measure of quality practice. The prescriptive nature of the Registration Standards and the intrinsic linking of standards to quality failed to accommodate traditional concepts of professionalisation and worker support needs inherent to working in the complex child and family welfare service system.

- Compliance demands are impacting negatively on the sector across a variety of domains. Compliance is resource intensive, requires a significant use of worker time and is impacting on levels of worker satisfaction. Workers consistently identified that time and resources spent on compliance are impacting on their capacity to work with service users. Managers raised concerns that compliance is emerging as one of the factors influencing levels of worker recruitment and retention. The scope of the reform agenda and the range of changes needing to be absorbed concurrently by agencies (LAC, CRIS/SP, registration, new legislative regimes) have had significant resource implications that have not been catered for within the funding regime. Without a review of this issue, participants assessed that the system is locked into crisis management. The additional costs of compliance are now being met from CSO discretionary funds. The impact of this has increased significantly due to the global economic climate and the decrease in funds fluidity for agencies. The end result of this has been a diminished capacity to introduce innovation and decreased flexibility in providing new services. The estimation has been that between 7 -10 % of funding is being used to run the compliance regime.
- Compliance requirements are assessed as likely to impact on the capacity of small agencies within the sector. Feedback provided indicated that small agencies are giving consideration to pulling out of service delivery due to the cost and worker burden of the compliance regime.
- Concerns were raised in regard to perceived resource inequities between the government and non government sector linked to implementation of the reform agenda. This issue is closely aligned to the notion of partnership and 'shared space'. Perceived resource inequity for implementation of the reform agenda provides an additional barrier to relationship building between government and the CSO.
- The regulatory framework was assessed as having impacted organisationally through a significant loss of autonomy. While Boards of Management/ Governance assessed that the reform agenda had strengthened board member understanding of the governance process they also identified it had negatively impacted on the capacity of the Board to set the agenda. This is particularly pertinent where the CSO often needs to manage a range of standards from a broad range of funding sources.

Summary for Section 3.3: Risk Impacts for the CSO

The key concerns arising in the research in relation to risk related to:

- The stronger emphasis on assessment skill for Family Services workers. This has been a very hard adjustment for workers with a shift in emphasis from intake to managing risk.
- The focus on complex cases. Service delivery is now more focused on complex cases with a significant number of participants indicating that workers are feeling as though they are locked into working as statutory workers. There is a much greater level of statutory intervention and an expansion in the number of children subject to statutory orders. This represents a shift in risk and responsibility to CSOs with a resultant impact in terms of burnout, problems with vicarious trauma, recruitment, and retention and staff morale.
- The impact on service users. As identified, the clients accessing family services are more complex and the resources needed to deal with this level of complexity are not available. The result of this was assessed as being that services are being targeted toward the most vulnerable and leaving many struggling families without support they would have received in the past.

Recommendation 1:

That further research be undertaken to track emergent variations in the assessments made by the Out of Home Care and Family Services sectors on the value of the reform agenda, particularly the Best Interests Framework, in enhancing practice. This research should explore variations in:

1. Perceptions around how the work undertaken by the different sectors is valued;
2. The implementation and integration of diverse practice management tools (i.e. Best Interests Planning and Looking After Children) within these sectors; and,
3. Practice approaches used.

A key aim of this research would be to develop a greater understanding of the impacts of these variations on service system outcomes.

Recommendation 2:

That the Department of Human Services, in consultation with the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, review existing strategies for the promotion of inter-sectoral involvement in implementation of the reform agenda. This is to determine any additional education and support needs for secondary and universal service providers as part of the facilitation of service system integration, in line with the goals of the child and family welfare reform agenda.

Recommendation 3:

That the Department of Human Services include the monitoring/measurement of service system integration in their current and ongoing evaluation of the reform process. This will facilitate the measurement of current and ongoing inter sectoral education and support needs as they relate to the reforms.

Recommendation 4:

That senior management from the Department of Human Services and Community Service Organisations develop a strategy to address barriers to partnership building within the child and family welfare sector. This strategy should include processes to enhance notions of 'shared space' and approaches to overcome embedded views relating to traditional perceptions of the purchaser/provider relationship. This strategy should be developed with the capacity for implementation across all DHS regions.

Recommendation 5:

That a cost-benefit analysis be undertaken of the compliance process. The results of this should be used to inform a structured assessment of the impact of resource diversion for compliance on the capacity of the CSO to maintain levels of service delivery and pursue innovation within the child and family welfare sector.

Recommendation 6:

That further research be undertaken over a three year timeframe, and with an extended agency participant pool, to examine the following areas identified as requiring further study:

- The measurement of consistent and sustained changes in service outcomes linked to the reforms. This should occur across the range of organisational barriers and enablers flagged within this preliminary research as shaping CSO capacity to achieve enhanced service outcomes. As part of this process it should be recognised that the KPMG evaluation data specific to service outcomes has potential to provide a data pool to supplement this research.
- Boards of management/governance. This should focus on the measurement of the impacts of the reform agenda on issues of board autonomy, burden of risk and attrition rates.
- Risk and risk aversion. This should focus on the issue of risk, with the aim of tracking the impact of risk on the CSO workforce. It should include an examination of workforce culture, worker recruitment and retention, role satisfaction and burnout as well as professional development provision/needs. It should consider the issue of transfer of risk to the CSO and the impact of this transfer to service outcomes.

The extended participant pool should include agencies based in metropolitan as well as regional locations to maximise the insights gained across a range of geographical locations.

Research Framework and Findings

1. Background and Program Overview

A team of researchers at the University of Ballarat identified, in mid 2008, the need to undertake research to examine the impacts of the current child and family welfare reform agenda on regional Community Service Organisations (CSOs). The reform agenda underway in Victoria has seen the development of a series of initiatives, supported by extensive national and international literature and promoted as a central mechanism through which to achieve change across a range of domains. The reforms have been introduced as part of a commitment to enhance service delivery, as a mechanism through which to stabilize and build partnerships between government and non government sector agencies, and as a means through which to introduce a new level of response for children at risk.

It was envisioned from the outset that this would occur through building a service system supported by a range of statutory processes, a framework for service delivery (Best Interests Framework) and an improved response capacity.

The key objectives of the reforms have been identified as being:

- Earlier intervention through family services to support families in protecting their children from harm.
- Broadening the focus across all services from safety to consistently encompass stability and child development.
- Improvement of the process of planning, coordination and service delivery across child protection, out of home care and family services.
- Improved responses to meet the needs of Aboriginal children and their families.
- Improved cultural competence in service delivery.

An initial literature review, conducted by University of Ballarat researchers in 2008, identified that there had been no research on the emerging impacts of the reform agenda at the organisational level. While the independent consultants KPMG have been commissioned to undertake a formative (process) and effectiveness (impact) evaluation running from 2008 – 2011, there was no work focusing specifically on organisational impacts for CSOs, particularly CSOs operating in regional Victoria. This was not unexpected given that the reforms, even at the time of writing this report, remain in the infancy of their consolidation and implementation. The need to take research action to begin to track, measure and review emerging impacts was however highlighted through both initial anecdotal feedback and through site based analysis. The preliminary work of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (2007) indicated an emergent economic and service impact from the

reforms, particularly on service delivery, organisational autonomy and partnership building.

Consequently a proposal was put to a number of CSOs in regional Victoria, as well as to the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, to undertake preliminary work with the University of Ballarat research team. Eight regional CSOs from across three Department of Human Services regions agreed to be involved in the data collection process. These agencies were:

- Centacare, Ballarat
- Child and Family Services, Ballarat
- Lisa Lodge, Ballarat
- Wimmera Uniting Care, Horsham
- St Lukes Anglicare, Bendigo
- Bethany Community Support, Geelong
- Glastonbury Child and Family Services, Geelong
- Mackillop Family Support (Barwon)

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare was also a key participant in the research and data collection process.

The research design, after a process of consultation, was established to be the first structured exploration of the specific ways in which implementation of the reform agenda is impacting on CSO management and service delivery. Additionally, it was determined that the focus of initial research should be on regional locations, given that the majority of past research has been centred in metropolitan locations.

The consultative process resulted in a research framework which focused, in particular, on issues of: 1) the influence of the reforms on the maintenance of non government sector autonomy; 2) the costs of compliance to meeting the new registration requirements; 3) the emerging impact on service delivery; and, 4) the extent to which the aimed for enhanced partnership responses, as embedded in legislation, are being translated in the practice context.

2. Research Design and Methods

In order to gain insights into these key focus areas, a number of research questions were developed. These questions were:

- What have been the emerging impacts of the reform agenda at the management and operational level for the CSO?
- How do new compliance requirements impact on governance and autonomy within CSOs?
- In what ways do CSOs conceptualise partnership development within the new legislative climate?
- To what extent is this conceptualisation playing out in the practice setting?

These were supported through a range of sub questions that were used within the interview process.

2.1 Study Methods

The methods used in this study included national and international evidence-based searches, questionnaires, individual and group interviews and policy document analysis. This approach allowed findings to be cross-referenced, and established a process whereby issues that were not addressed/identified through one data collection method could be verified and validated through alternative methods.

The study applied both quantitative and qualitative methods and was undertaken in two phases. The treatment of time in both phases was cross sectional. Phase one involved data collection using two questionnaires, both based on Likert scales, to gather both subjective and quantifiable data.

The first questionnaire was distributed to all staff working in Out of Home Care, Family Services and agency management across the 8 participating CSOs. Quantifiable data gathered through this questionnaire included length of practice, understanding of the reform process and assessments of impact on service delivery, worker satisfaction and organisational processes.

The second questionnaire was completed by Board of Management/Governance members and focused on the impacts of the reforms on the governance process. Subjective data examined views about the benefit of the reforms on agency governance processes and the impacts on specific governance functions.

Phase two involved in-depth, semi-structured individual and group interviews with team leaders, program managers, quality advisers and Chief Executive Officers/Executive Directors. These interviews sought to gather subjective data on participants' perceptions around the organisational, service delivery and professional practice impacts of the reforms.

2.1.1 Literature Review

An initial literature review was undertaken involving electronic searches of key national and international databases from 2000 – 2009.

The search pools used to focus the literature review were: risk management; autonomy and compliance; concepts of professionalism; best interests; partnership; and, governance and the community sector. The databases hosts searched during the literature review were Academic Search Premier; EBSCO Host; Firstsearch; and, Informit. Background information was also taken from relevant reports/ reviews from national and international child and family welfare, as appropriate to search needs.

The findings in relation to this literature review are not reported in detail in this report but will be available in subsequent publications.

2.1.2 Policy Analysis

Policy documentation provides significant insights into both the organisational and funding body guidelines and expectations for service delivery. It also clarifies the formal processes for program development, as well as the scope and focus of program delivery. Analysis of this documentation provided an important knowledge base around the rationale for, and goals of, the reform agenda. Documents included Child, Youth and Families Act (2005), the Strategic Framework for Family Services, the Registration Standards and DHS policy guidelines for key program areas.

2.1.3 Staff and Management Questionnaires

Questionnaires were distributed and returned between July and November 2008 with one hundred and ninety eight staff receiving a 31 item questionnaire developed to address the research objectives.

A total return rate of 43% was achieved from across the 8 agencies with return rates from individual agencies ranging from 17% to 98%. All agencies involved in the research returned questionnaires with a number of strategies used to maximise the level of questionnaire returns. These included the provision of regular reminders to agency management through an electronic project update system and the use of telephone and/or email contact with key regional staff.
Reminders on questionnaire returns were also provided at all focus group and interview contacts.

While not high, the return rate of 43% is above statistical norms for questionnaire methods of data collection.

2.1.4 Board of Management Questionnaires

Eighty two Board of Management members received a separate 11 item questionnaire between July and September 2008. This questionnaire was also developed to address the research objectives of the project.

A total aggregated return rate of 50% was achieved from Board members across the 8 agencies with return rates from individual agencies ranging from 100% to zero returns.

2.1.5 Group and Individual Interviews

The provision of subjective insights into the impacts of the reform agenda was pivotal to achieving deeper understandings. This was embedded within the research questions that were established for this research. The group and individual interview process provided the method to operationalise the research aim and achieve a greater understanding of the impact of reforms.

A total of 79 participants were interviewed between June and December 2008. The breakdown of numbers involved in group and individual interviews across the participant pool is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Group & Individual Interview Breakdown

Agency	Group Interviews		No. Individual Interviews	Senior Managers	Program Managers	Team Leaders	Total No. Participants
	No. Groups	No. Group Participants					
Centre for Excellence	2	11	1	12	-	-	**12**
Agency 1	2	10	3	3	5	5	**13**
Agency 2	2	10	2	4	5	3	**12**
Agency 3	1	4	0	3	1	-	**4**
Agency 4	1	6	1	1	4	2	**7**
Agency 5	1	6	1	1	3	3	**7**
Agency 6	2	5	0	1	3	1	**5**
Agency 7	2	14	2	2	4	10[1]	**16**
Agency 8	1	2	1	2	1	0	**3**
TOTAL	**14**	**68**	**11**	**29**	**26**	**24**	**79**

The interviews provided the majority of the subjective data used in this research but was supplemented by the qualitative components from the 85 returned staff and management questionnaires.

2.1.6 Ethics

Ethical approval appropriate for research involving individuals was gained from the University of Ballarat Human Research Ethics Committee. The principles guiding the data collection and analysis process were observed to serve the best interests of all participants at each stage of the research process.

[1] This agency chose to include some program workers into their initial team leader focus group which increased numbers. There were 3 Team Leaders within this group.

3. Research Results

Findings from the data collection process have been themed and are presented in the following sections of this report. The report begins with an assessment of how CSOs perceive the value of the reforms to the philosophy and service delivery goals of the sector and then progresses to a discussion of the key issues identified by the research participants as arising from the reforms.

3.1 A View of the Value of the Reforms

The reform process has involved a complex progression that has been characterized by extensive consultation and input from across the government and the non government sector. The reforms are unique in that, from the outset, they emerged as a result of a *review* of legislation, policy and the programmatic aspects of the statutory child protection system (Bromfield 2004). This approach varied from previous attempts at service enhancement which had focused on the potential for change within the context of existing legislative, policy and program parameters. An extensive review of existing service delivery parameters (as documented in Allen Consulting Group, 2003) coupled with a consultative process involving submissions from key stakeholders (as documented in Frieberg, Kirby & Ward, 2004), led to the current reform agenda. The reform process, led by the Department of Human Services (2004) is an initiative characterized by a consultative agenda and a commitment to meeting the best interests of the child.

Given this historical background, it was important to gain a clear perspective on CSO perceptions on the value of the reform agenda as a mechanism to enhance the potential of the sector to improve outcomes for children, youth and families in Victoria.

Consequently, the first point reviewed through the data collection process, using both quantitative and qualitative techniques, was an exploration of participants' assessments of the benefits of/need for, the introduction of the reform agenda.

Eighty seven percent of those who returned questionnaires indicated that they had a good understanding of the reform process. The remaining 13% were individuals who were new to the sector and were still in the orientation stages of practice. All of those involved in the interview process indicated a strong understanding of the reform process and the elements of systemic change which it encompasses.

This assessment of participants' understanding of the reforms provided a strong basis from which to review how the reforms are perceived within participating CSOs.

3.1.1 A Preliminary Assessment

The majority of participants assessed the key aspects of the reform agenda positively. The reform agenda was consistently viewed as providing the foundation through which to support needed change. Those areas identified consistently in both

questionnaire and interview data as potentially service enhancing aspects of the reform agenda were:

- The Best Interests Framework. This was viewed, by a majority of 74% of questionnaire respondents, as providing a greater level of clarity for professional decision making and shared understandings.
- The capacity of the reforms to provide a mechanism for a more integrated and coordinated approach to service delivery; more uniform expectations and ways of working across the sector and a shared understanding of practice.
- The broader and clearer definition provided of child development.
- The inclusion of the concept of cumulative harm, albeit with some consistent questioning around how this concept would be operationalised. At the time of data collection, there had been no definitive legislative testing of the concept across the regions involved in the research.
- The greater overt emphasis on child centred and family focused practice.
- The enhanced capacity for improved information sharing (issues relating to how this potential tool is being operationalised will be discussed later in this report).
- The establishment of Child FIRST and Community Based Child Protection workers as mechanisms to drive and support earlier intervention and prevention through community based intake.

There was a parallel view advanced, within the interview data, that the reforms were a positive development for the sector. Ninety five percent of those interviewed supported the concept of the reforms, with listed strengths closely aligned to those identified within questionnaire data. Evidence of the support for the reforms is captured in representative statements from the data such as:

> *There is much more emphasis on planning for children, a great thing. The establishment of Child FIRST provides an alternative pathway for services and an effective alternative in terms of professional referrals.*

> *The new Act appears to be much more focused on the best interests of the child and building the care networks and this has to result in improvements in how issues are viewed and responded to.*

This level of support for the reforms was consistent across data collection methods and illustrated the common philosophy in place around the need for a change agenda to enhance service outcomes.

Once this consistency in commitment was identified, more specific feedback was sought on how this 'in principle' support played out across a number of domains, with data providing valuable insights on a number of key areas.

3.1.2 The Best Interests Framework

The centrality of the Best Interests framework to the reform agenda ensured that it was one of the areas examined during data collection. The introduction of the Best Interests framework aimed to facilitate and support the development of a consistent approach to working with children, youth and families. It sought to embed a practice approach characterised by: a common language; the implementation of interventions appropriate to culture, age and stage of development; an adherence to common principles; and, a coherent policy and practice framework (Department of Human Services 2007a, pg 1).

Questionnaire data about whether the Best Interests framework had been successful in promoting consistency of practice across the sector provided highly positive results. As set out in Table 2, the Best Interests framework was assessed, by a majority of 74% of questionnaire respondents, as beneficial to practice through the provision of a clearer framework for professional decision making. A further 13% remained undecided on this issue with only 13% of respondents indicating that they did not believe that Best Interests provided a framework for enhanced practice.

Table 2: Emerging Operational Impacts: The Best Interests Framework

Reform Impact	% Yes	% Uncertain	% No
The development of a clearer framework for professional decision making through the Best Interests framework	74	13	13

Of the 13% (*n=11) of* respondents who rated this variable as 'undecided' only 3 respondents were from Family Services. Further, of the 13% (*n=11)* of respondents who rated this variable as 'disagree', only 2 were from Family Services. The remaining respondents who remained 'uncertain' or 'disagree' around the value of Best Interests were either from Out of Home Care (*n=15)* or from Agency Management *(n=2).* This result was mirrored in interview data with Out of Home Care managers and team leaders raising a greater number of questions around the role of the Best Interests framework to their practice than other research participants.

Preliminary data suggests that this variation is linked to the fact that the Out of Home Care sector has, since early 2002, used the Looking After Children (LAC) framework as their care and placement management tool. This is likely to shape their perception of the impact of Best Interests to their practice, albeit that both frameworks mirror elements relevant to the life of the child/young person.

While the correlation between: 1) the focus of service delivery; 2) the practice management tool used by practitioners; and, 3) their assessment of the value of the Best Interests framework was not specifically measured in this research, the variation in assessment between Family Services and Out of Home Care is of note. The presence of these variations, and their potential impact on the type of service

integration necessary for the reforms, is an area that needs to be researched more fully as part of longer term examination of the implementation of the reform agenda.

Written questionnaire feedback from Family Services workers consistently identified the framework as an important and valued part of the reforms and a mechanism likely to enhance service outcomes across the sector.

Written comment:

> *The Best Interests Framework provides consistency; a common language and a way for us to all work together using the same approach*
>
> *I think that Best Interests has been an important change in how we work with child protection. A really important framework for our work.*

Interview data clarified that the standardisation of practice provided through the Best Interests framework was seen to be intrinsically linked to creating a greater clarity and valuing of the work undertaken by Family Services. At the Family Services Team Leader level, interview participants collectively drew a direct correlation between their expanded role and an enhanced sense amongst Family Services workers of being viewed, both within and across the sector, as key players in earlier intervention and prevention.

This view is evidenced by statements such as:

> *Pre the reform there was a lack of clarity around what each area did. The introduction of a common framework has been a major paradigm shift…in the past the Department felt that Family Services were only concerned with family wellbeing. They have now come to understand that family services has always been about much more complex issues and this realisation and acceptance has allowed for a significant increase in (perceptions around) professionalism in family services.*
>
> *We are beginning to be seen as professionals with valuable tools and strategies and processes for referral. This is due, in part, to consistency of practice and information sharing linked to the reforms. This is such a powerful thing for us as a program.*
>
> *A greater recognition by the Department that we are professionals. We are not 'the runts of the litter'. I think they get this much more now.*

Feedback around shifts in professional recognition and the development of a stronger practice framework was unique to Family Services research participants. While all participants from Out of Home Care supported the reforms, a number identified that they felt disempowered by the shifts and a sense that Out of Home Care was now viewed as the 'end of the line'; when other approaches had failed.

This is evidenced in statement such as:

> *We feel the opposite to that (responding to a comment by a Family Services Team leader on the value of Best Interests). We feel like we are listened to less, like we are just the end of the line and that we need to pick up the placement when all the rest doesn't work. We aren't supported or respected for this in any way and it just seems to have become harder to feel like we are making a difference.*

While this statement does not represent all Out of Home Care interview participants, it is representative of the view of 10 out of the 17 (58%) of the Team Leaders involved in interview process. This is a significant proportion of the pool and represents a discrepancy in views between the two sectors that would benefit from further research.

3.1.3 Intra and Inter Sectoral Practice

The feedback on how the reforms had contributed to enhanced working relationships with other CSOs and with the secondary and universal service sector indicated that the reform process has been developing as a beneficial one.

Table 3 provides an overview of indicators that suggest greater coordination since the introduction of the reforms.

Table 3: Emerging Operational Impacts: Integrated & Coordinated Practice

Reform Impact	% Yes	% Uncertain	% No
CSOs building a stronger and more responsive relationship with other CSOs	64	28	8
Development of a more integrated service system	62	22	16
An increased capacity for cooperation with other providers of services to children, youth & families	55	28	17

A majority of 64% of questionnaire respondents assessed that the reforms have supported the development of stronger relationships with other CSOs while 55% agreed that interagency cooperative practice had been facilitated since the reforms.

This is an important initial measure given the goals of the reform agenda around enhanced service integration. It is a result however that needs to be considered within the framework of historical professional links.

Data collected through the interview process identified very clear pre-existing indicators for successful enhancement of inter agency relationships. Interview participants across all agencies consistently overtly linked enhanced professional relationships to the foundational strengths that were in place between agencies prior to the reform process. A recurring message was that the community services sector had a strong history of working closely together in the service delivery process. This was assessed as having been pivotal in any enhanced interrelationship emerging from the reform process.

Interview statements such as the following highlight the influence of existing culture and historical contexts on any change agenda:

> *Well we always have had strong working relationships with other agencies. You can't afford not to. It has made it easier to implement changes but it has not developed because of the changes.*
>
> *I don't think the reform agenda has really made that much of a difference to how CSOs work together – in a rural region it just has to work or nothing will.*
>
> *Relationships are the critical factor for success. The reforms themselves are irrelevant if there are poor professional relationships. It is critical to build up a connection from the outset.*

While this is a promising initial result, a percentage of respondents (between 8 and 28%) remained either uncertain or disagreed that the reforms had improved cooperative practice with the secondary and universal service system. The interview data provided some insights into these assessments, with participants identifying that inhibitors of service integration were, in the main, discipline based and structural.

Discipline and sector based difference as a basis for the creation of barriers to service integration is not a new phenomenon. It has long been identified within the literature as one of the factors that slows the transfer of policy concepts to practice reality (Hudson, 2002; Leathard, 2003; Loxley, 1997; Masterson, 2002; Murphy, 2004). The promotion of service integration as part of the reform agenda assumes a capacity to break down traditional barriers. Interview responses suggest that, while collaboration is improving, discipline and sector based differences continue to impact on service system integration.

> *We are pushing for a holistic approach where we respond in an integrated way to an array of needs – but we work with sectors that continue to focus on the symptomatic – their approach is to treat the patient and only the patient. Getting these sectors involved in a more service system integrated way can be a nightmare.*
>
> *The rest of the service system is not moving with it; without the movement the reforms cannot be successful to the extent that they should be. Strong silos that don't put it within the context of the child. It is disheartening to see different pieces of legislation for different programs pulling people in different directions.*
>
> *The magistrates just don't get what we are trying to do. I hope this changes soon as it is a real problem.*

These statements illustrate the nature and impact of these type of barriers to service integration.

This issue is exacerbated by the fact that agencies continue to operate in historically established silos. This is true both within and outside of the child and family welfare sector. Funding structures consolidate these silos and, while the administrative rationale for their maintenance is clear, it makes it very difficult to break down traditional structural barriers. The diverse legislative and policy parameters that impact and shape practice across the secondary service system remain an area requiring a policy focus by government:

> *We are funded in silos, think in silos and develop standards in silos. We must find some commonality if we are to survive*

When these impacts are considered within the context of the reforms they highlight the type of inter sectoral support and education that needs to be undertaken. Without this, a unified service system understanding of the reforms and a consistent adoption of the practice approaches needed to achieve enhanced outcomes will not be optimised.

Acknowledging these findings, it is also important to point out that a significant 62% of survey respondents assessed that, overall, the reforms had supported the development of enhanced service system integration. These are promising initial indicators and should continue to be monitored as part of the ongoing evaluation of reform implementation.

3.1.4 A Better Working Relationship

A key goal of the research process was to begin to examine the extent to which the reforms had been effective in maximizing links and a positive working relationship between Child Protection and CSOs.

To this end, both the survey and the interview data specifically examined participant perceptions of the practice relationship across the government and non government child and family welfare practice environment since the commencement of the reforms.

A majority of 60% of survey respondents assessed that there had been an improvement in the ways in which Child Protection and CSOs are working together, with a minority of only 15% believing that the reforms had had no impact on improved collaborative practice.

Table 4 provides an overview of survey respondents' views on the issues of effective working relationships and partnerships.

Table 4: Emerging Operational Impacts: Community Service Organisations and the Government

Reform Impact	% Yes	% Uncertain	% No
Child protection and CSOs working more effectively together	60	25	15
CSOs building a stronger and more responsive relationship with government	48	36	16
CSOs building stronger partnerships with DHS	42	32	26

Interview and written questionnaire feedback identified the important role of the Community Based Child Protection Worker (CPCPW) in helping to build a more effective relationship between Child Protection and CSOs for community based intake.
This person/s was consistently promoted as someone who had a clear understanding of the changes in the practice environment since the reforms and who was able to act as a mediator with regional child protection teams:

> *The Community Based Child Protection worker has helped with things such as information sharing and working through all the potential problems; without this position it would not work.*

Linked to the importance of the CBCPW in supporting the development of effective working relationships was the issue of information sharing. In instances in which an effective relationship had been developed, supported by the CBCPW, information sharing processes were enhanced and were identified as an important determinant of the effective professional relationship. In instances in which there were vacancies or in which there was notable change in personnel to the position, information sharing between CSOs and child protection remained problematic and impacted on the capacity for strong partnership building.

> *It does seem that some CP workers have not come to grips with the new legislation in regards to communication, information sharing and the need to include the parent if they are to meet the best interests of the child. This makes collaboration hard.*

This assessment was further supported by questionnaire data which showed that 58% of respondents remained unconvinced that effective information processes were occurring in line with the requirements of the reform agenda. This was viewed as problematic in building the type of practice partnerships inherent to implementation of the reform agenda.

When questionnaire respondents were asked to measure the success of the reforms in building stronger partnerships, the results highlighted a discrepancy between the policy ideal and reality at the practice level. Only 42% of survey respondents identified that partnership building had been enhanced, with a further 32% indicating

they remained undecided around the effectiveness of the reforms in building enhanced partnerships.

Seventy of the seventy eight participants in the interview process (89%) were unequivocal in their assessment that partnership building had been less than successful since the inception of the reforms.

Within this context it was acknowledged that there had been an increase in the level of CSO involvement in state wide meetings and in providing feedback on policy issues. It was also acknowledged that policy documentation for the reforms consistently promotes the notion of partnership in service delivery. Despite these indicators for success in partnership building, participants identified shortfalls in the attainment of this ideal. Implementation of the reforms, particularly at the regional level, was characterised by an approach in which partnership development was stifled.

An important concept raised during data collection was that of 'shared space'. A perspective put forward by research participants was that, in a true partnership, all parties have an equal capacity for input and an equal burden in regard to regulatory requirements; a shared space.

In regard to the issue of equal capacity for input, 84% of questionnaire respondents either disagreed that the reforms had resulted in equity in decision making or were uncertain. Participants felt that there are aspects of the reforms in which they have had no input. The key issues raised during interview were the new powers of the Ombudsman and the reserve power of the Secretary/Minister to stand boards aside. These issues had previously been raised in documentation developed by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (2007, p. 20) and continue to be viewed as examples of inequality of input and barriers to partnership building:

> *We are listened to but not heard. When this happens often enough then you know that you have no real decision making power… you can feel overwhelmed and disempowered. You don't know the bureaucratic language and there is a power imbalance with the Department.*

> *We entered into this process with real hope for change. At the start we were able to help shape it all but now we are just talking and talking but, here in the region, it makes no difference.*

The compliance framework established through the Registration Standards, and introduced in the legislation for CSOs, remains a barrier to notions of partnership building, with a majority of senior managers involved in the interview process identifying that it is problematic that there are not comparable compliance requirements for regional child protection teams. Participants assessed that this approach seriously undermined any capacity for partnership development:

> *CSO do standards and compliance but (the funding body) does not need to meet the same standards. No notion of shared space. You can't be partners when one of you is holding the purse strings.*

These were identified as key factors in compromising the capacity for enhanced working relationships between DHS and child protection.

Of particular concern was the fact that partnership building continued to be compromised at the regional level. Only two of the eight agencies involved in the research identified a strong culture of partnership building into regional practice environments.

There was a very consistent assessment across the remaining agencies that, while there was a strong commitment to partnership building at the more senior levels of the DHS bureaucracy, resource and service system demands at the regional level made this notion difficult to consolidate. Within a complex service system environment with competing demands for resources, for case assessment, for meeting planning demands, for placement location and for resource management and service administration, power imbalances continued to arise. In instances in which there are competing demands on time and resources, traditional approaches based on the purchaser/provider concept emerge, severely diminishing the capacity for partnership building.

Evidence to validate this assessment is found in statements such as:

> *Notions of partnership are still finding their feet. On the ground level it is different from other levels. Some DHS leaders have been great at promoting the notion of partnership but this is tested on the ground where workers for the funding body still maintain the power of the funder as a stick for bringing about a desired response.*
>
> *There remains a division between purchaser and provider. (the funder) think they have the right to act as a 'funder' and pull rank when they have no right.*
>
> *Workers from (the funding body) need to back off. They seem to be unable to let go. They need to trust Family Services to be the professionals; the old middle managers are consistently the block to this.*
>
> *If the power/proscriptive approach remains the norm in the new environment then workers will walk. They are professionals, they realise this and they need this to be respected.*
>
> *Calling a master/slave relationship a partnership does not change the reality of what it is.*

These research findings are significant. They represent a clear barrier to enhanced working relationships built on partnership between DHS and CSOs. They highlight the need for senior managers from both DHS and CSO to work closely to specifically address these barriers at the regional level. This is a priority need to optimise the capacity of reforms to achieved the change agenda and maximise outcomes for children, youth and families.

3.1.5 Enhanced Service Outcomes

The nature and scope of the reform agenda indicates that any research into changes in service outcomes needs to be undertaken over an extended timeframe to allow for service implementation issues to be addressed and for changes to become embedded into the practice environment. It is expected that these are the types of outcomes that will be measured through the three year evaluation currently being undertaken through KPMG. This research did not aim to measure service outcomes but, as part of tracking emerging organisational and practice impacts of the reforms, was able to provide preliminary indicators over the first year of practice.

A preliminary questionnaire assessment of whether service users had received a better quality service since the introduction of the reforms found no definitive trend. Thirty percent of respondents indicated that the service quality has not improved, 36% assessing the service quality had improved and 34% remained uncertain of service enhancement impacts. A slightly higher 45% of respondents assessed that the reforms had lead to a reduction in barriers for service users through earlier intervention and prevention. While these are interesting initial indicators the program is not at evaluability readiness to provide any valid outcomes in relation to service enhancement. A greater timeframe is needed to measure consistent and sustained changes in outcomes linked to the reforms.

3.1.6 Summary of Key Findings of Relevance to Section 3.1

Analysis of the interview and questionnaire data from program participants provided a number of key insights specific to the perceived value of the reforms since their introduction.

The findings specific to this sub section of the report were that:

- The Best Interests Framework was, in the main, assessed as a positive element of the reform process. Research participants from the Family Services area valued the consistency of practice provided by the framework and the enhanced recognition of their role that had occurred in parallel to the introduction of the Best Interests Framework. This trend was not consistently evident with Out of Home Care workers and is an area that would benefit from additional research.
- There was some indication of improved cooperative practice as a result of the reforms both within the child and family welfare services sector and across the secondary and universal service system. This process was substantially facilitated by pre-existing professional relationships providing the foundation for facilitating cooperation. Issues of discipline boundaries and organisational silos continue to create barriers to maximising the level of cooperation and service integration across the service system.
- There has been some improvement in the working relationship between CSO and DHS staff since the introduction of the reforms although some barriers to collaborative practice remain. The Community Based Child Protection Worker plays an important role in supporting links across the sector however problems relating to effective communication and appropriate information

sharing remain. The differences in compliance requirements between the government and non government sector and the absence of a 'shared space' have impacted on partnership building across the sector.

There was a view that the reform agenda had not consistently allowed for equality of input and decision making and that the barriers created by the purchaser/provider relationship remained in place, particularly at the regional level.

- It is too early in the reform process to measure the impact of the reforms in achieving enhanced service outcomes for service users. Preliminary measures provided no definitive trend relating to outcomes. There were indications that there has been some reduction in service system barriers for service users through earlier intervention and prevention. Research is required to definitively measure the service enhancement capacity of the reforms.

3.2 The Impact of Compliance

The compliance framework and, as part of this, the Registration Standards established through legislation, were identified as having had a significant impact on the sector by all research participants. All those involved in the interview process agreed that compliance and regulation are necessary to ensure service consistency and to help identify areas needing to be changed/managed differently at the organisational level.

The consistent assessment by participants that compliance is important for good organisational management and governance is important to highlight. It reinforces that compliance has been implemented in a responsive environment where participants viewed regulation as a means through which to enhance both service delivery and the professionalism of the organisation. A majority of 70% of questionnaire respondents identified that they had been adequately trained and supervised in terms of standards attainment with written questionnaire feedback reinforcing support for some form of compliance for organisational improvement:

Written questionnaire comments:

The reforms have meant we have had to look at standards of service delivery and areas of improvement, framework for service delivery.

The standards are a great idea– the theory to practice is a little different but great in theory.

Any professional organisation must have standards and regulation – it is something we welcomed and something we always knew we had to do.

We must agree on standards and work toward them so everyone get a consistent go.

Standards are a necessary part of any organisation and something we need to put in place.

Despite this level of responsiveness to compliance and regulation a majority of senior managers and team leaders involved in the interview process identified that the regulatory framework had negatively impacted on CSOs across a number of domains.

The key areas raised as negatively affected by the compliance regime relate to:

- Service quality.
- Resourcing.
- Organisational management.

3.2.1 Compliance and Quality

Interview feedback specific to compliance as a facilitator of quality practice highlighted that there was concern amongst CSO managers and team leaders around the emphasis on standards as the mechanism through which to attain service quality. There was a consistent assessment that the prescriptive nature of the Registration Standards and the intrinsic linking of standards to quality were flawed.
This assessment is supported by much of the key literature on compliance and regulation which identifies standards are an important mechanism in organisational management but are limited as a tool for embedded quality enhancement (Ayres & Braithwaite, 1992; Black, 1997; Gunningham & Johnstone, 1999; Parker, 1999; 2002).

It should be acknowledged that DHS documentation (2007c) does not promote standards as the sole mechanism for quality attainment however research participants assessed that the breadth, complexity, proscriptive nature of the standards and the resources that needed to be allocated were such that CSOs had very limited capacity to move beyond standards attainment. The emphasis on registration and the associated demands to focus quality initiatives on gaining registration has resulted in compliance and quality being inextricably linked at the practice level. The extent to which compliance demands are perceived to be impacting on service development, innovation and quality is evidenced by statements such as:

> *The need to meet standards because it is assumed it will result in a quality service and better results has resulted in us losing sight of doing anything but providing a determined service and meeting administrative requirements. The system itself is stifling innovation and creativity.*

> *Compliance and service registration is very difficult to manage…We must work on standards rather than on notions of good practice. No objection to standards. The issue is resources to adequately address the requirements.*

Participants developed this theme further to identify that there was an inherent assumption being made that, once standards were attained, the CSO would be seen to be delivering a quality service. Interview participants assessed this as flawed - as evidenced by statements such as:

Meeting the standards does not result in a better service. An exercise of ticking the right boxes does not substantially change practice; Just organises information on what we do in a more systematic way.

The standards drive practice. That would be disastrous if they are seen as the driver for service delivery… we need a minimum standard but how much does the funding body drive how we will practice – lots of balances and tension.

In an environment in which new initiatives are being implemented there should be capacity to track learnings and emergent themes and to shape practice in response to these. The requirements for registration through compliance were assessed to have limited the potential for this level of responsiveness.

Another issue raised by interview participants related to the need for specialisation if the child and family welfare sector is to provide a quality service. The resources diverted into compliance were assessed, by a majority of Program Managers interviewed, as resulting in a diminished capacity to consolidate and specialise. This assessment echoes contemporary research findings on externally imposed standards as an alternative to the traditional notions of professionalism. Traditional notions of the professional have been centred on practitioner knowledge and content, standardised skills, disciplinary control of professional practices, and closed or sheltered boundaries (Benveniste, 1987; Evetts; 2004; 2006; Noordegraff, 2007; Swailes, 2003). Contemporary literature has identified a shift toward a notion of what Evetts (2006) refers to as 'organisational professionalism'. Organisational professionalism occurs when the attainment of prescribed regulatory standards becomes THE central mechanism through which enhanced professional practice is measured.

Interview comments such as the following capture these concerns that professionalism will be defined through standards attainment rather than through traditional determinants of professional practice:

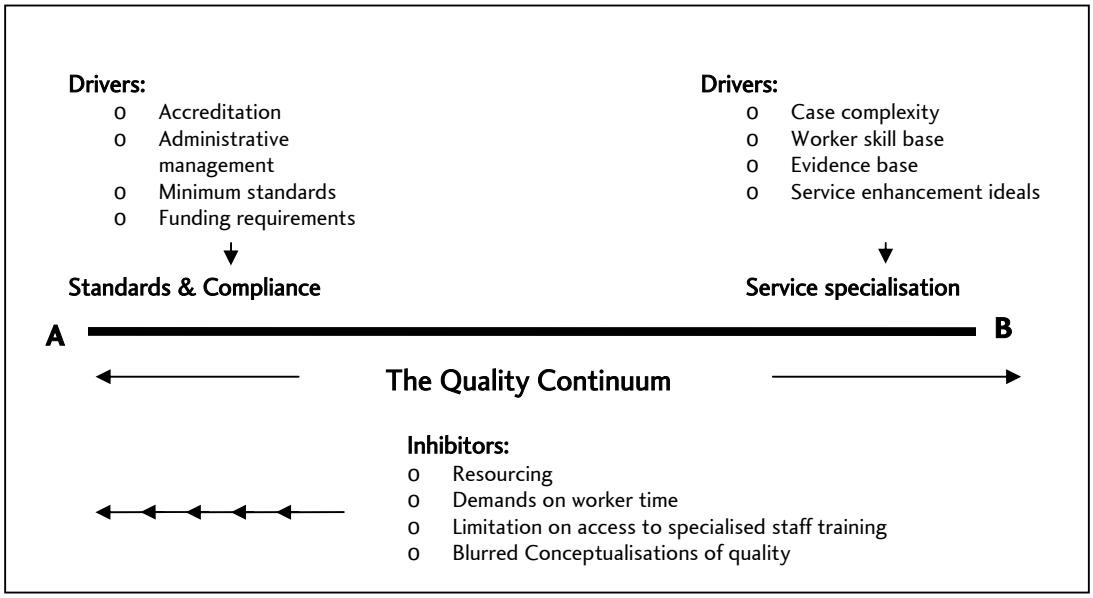
What is needed goes so far beyond standards; we need a more specialised and professionalised workforce with an evidence base to meet highly specialised needs.

… the sector has become much, much better at using evidence and understanding which interventions are best and why. This has resulted in a much more professional sector but, on the other hand all the bureaucratic layers are stifling agencies and accountability is over the top.

In summary, there was an overall assessment, amongst research participants, that the compliance regime, as it is structured, has blurred the nature of practice. If service delivery is conceptualised as a continuum in which mandatory (and necessary) standards are at one end (Point A) and quality enhancement through specialisation is at the other (Point B), the burden of compliance has meant that CSOs are struggling to move beyond Point A. This is despite the critical need in the sector for

specialisation and building a skilled workforce. This is depicted diagrammatically in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Quality Continuum



A further recurrent theme across all interviews, and one closely linked to the service enhancement inhibitors identified in Figure 1, related to the impact of compliance on worker capacity and satisfaction levels.

While the issue of resourcing will be explored in greater detail later in this report, at this point, the resource constraints on the worker and the impact of this on quality will be examined.

In a reflection of the previous work of Barber and Eaardley (2002) and Suhood (2001), participants assessed that compliance requirements, with limited indicators of quality outcomes attainment, are consuming worker resources:

> *has resulted in an increased workload and increased paperwork… this increase in compliance requirements is a tension for the worker.*

> *The extra workload for OHC associated with the reforms actually results in placement breakdown; people are doing paper work rather than the extra visits needed to identify a potential issue and avert a potential breakdown.*

> *Workers are spending huge amounts of time on paper work and less time in the field… the focus has shifted from relationship building with young people and families as well as provision of physical service to them, including material aid, due to the prioritisation of multiple reporting tasks.*

Questionnaire data on the issue of worker job satisfaction supported this assessment, highlighting that there had been changes in the structure of practice since the introduction of the reforms. The results from the questionnaire specific to these variables are provided in Table 5.

Table 5: Changing Workloads & Compliance

Reform Impact	% Yes	% Uncertain	% No
There has been a change in my work structure and focus since the reforms	64	15	21
Resources spent on compliance would be better spent on service delivery	58	30	12
Standards implementation has increased the level of satisfaction I get from my work	10	24	66

These results reinforce interview feedback that, while there is an understanding and acceptance of the need for the compliance regime, and an acceptance that standards are an important and necessary part of practice, this is tempered by the impacts that this regime is having on worker job capacity and satisfaction.

This view is captured in the following examples of interview feedback on the issue of worker resourcing and compliance:

> *The principle is sound but it is very difficult and time consuming and as it continues to fail to (change outcomes) it becomes disheartening for the worker*

> *Worker job satisfaction; all the extra requirements have really had an impact on levels of satisfaction. Paper based work has resulted in frustration; workers can see the benefits but get bogged down*

> *LAC can be very time consuming; as a framework it is based on a principle that is sound but to get all the partners together and on board is very difficult and time consuming and as it continues to fail it becomes disheartening for the worker.*

There was a consensus amongst interview participants that compliance requires a notably greater proportion of time spent in recording and maintaining written records, in meeting guidelines and in meeting accountability requirements. At the agency management level it was assessed (in both interviews and questionnaires) that there has been a considerable increase in the need to attend regional and statewide meetings and to read and provide feedback on policy documents. While this is overtly acknowledged as an important part of the partnership building process and one that needs to be consolidated if partnerships are to be optimised, the resource impacts of these requirements is of concern.

This theme was continued in questionnaire written feedback with the following statements representative of a trend that was included in over 90% of written comments received through the questionnaire

Written comments:

> *More time on paperwork and less time with clients, less time for management to spend with workers*
>
> *Significantly increased bureaucratic requirements and increased workload*
>
> *Many unfunded hours spent on compliance increasing pressure on workload elsewhere*
>
> *Registration process has placed a greater onus on CSOs and had doubled the workload.*

All senior managers and CEOs from participating agencies flagged this factor, in conjunction with the increased complexity of the service system and the greater levels of risk emerging for CSO workers since the reforms (refer to section 3.3 on risk aversion) as beginning to impact on worker retention rates.

> *Loss of experienced workers and a higher turn over of staff as a result of increased IT skill needs, registration, increased requirement to link theory and practice. This has put real pressure on the group. The complexity and the vulnerability of carrying risk is causing a higher level of burn out. It takes skill and personality to manage requirements successfully.*

The issue of worker satisfaction levels, and through this, levels of recruitment and retention, is closely linked to the resource implications of compliance in that compliance is being met within the existing budgetary allocation. Given this link, feedback was also sought from participants around the resource implications of compliance for the CSO.

3.2.2 Resource Implications of the Compliance Regime

Financial estimates data were provided by three of the participating agencies about the cost of compliance to facilitate the mapping of the costs of the regulatory regime[2]. These data, in conjunction with feedback from senior managers identified that between 7-10 % of CSO budgets were being allocated to run compliance regimes from across various funding pools. This costing includes a range of elements linked to compliance including training (workers, managers and carers); IT upgrades to accommodate new data bases, partnership management and quality portfolio management.

[2] This documentation has not been included within the body of this report to maintain the anonymity of participating agencies, in line with ethical clearance procedures.

A significant compliance cost for the agencies involved in this research project is the employment of a dedicated position for quality management. Managers involved in the data collection process identified that funding for this position was carried by the agencies. While some initial funding was provided to Out of Home Care to support this type of position, no corresponding resourcing has been provided for Family Services or for ongoing resourcing for quality in Out of Home Care. The rationale for short term initial funding was linked to the assumption that, once a compliance framework had been put in place, maintenance and extension of compliance frameworks would be able to be absorbed within the administrative elements of CSO funding. This has not occurred for a number of reasons. These include:

- the complexity of the compliance regime;
- the fact that Family Services did not have transition funding provided for compliance;
- the scope of record keeping and administration responsibilities for workers within the compliance regime;
- the parallel resource drain caused by the range of new initiatives such as CRIS/CRISP; the need for Care Team and Best Interests planning; Working with Children; increased training and support for carers and the extended implementation process for the Looking after Children care management model; and,
- the high staff turnover in Out of Home Care and Family Services (thereby requiring ongoing orientation training).

These factors have significant implications, particularly for rural locations where travel requirements, the difficulty of recruiting staff and the limited number of agencies for service delivery amplify the resource constraints on the CSO budget.

> *There has been a greater strain on resources linked to the reforms. It is difficult to bring teams together and because of the new requirements it takes longer for things to be put in place. This is a really major issue in locations where access to resources is limited anyway. It is not a whole sector in a rural area but rather just two key players. Administration is a huge drain; having to sit in front of the computer ensuring that compliance is achieved. This is a large drain that takes workers away from meeting the needs of the client.*

One of the mechanisms being used to address resource demands for the CSO has been the use of CSO discretionary funds. Research participants identified that the use of discretionary funds to support the implementation of the reforms, including compliance elements, was impacting on service delivery in a number of ways. Discretionary funds have been used variably across the participating agencies. In some instances the funds are used to run programs that are viewed as the core business of the agency but which are either not funded or only minimally funded from external sources. In other instances the funding is used to pursue new programs that

have been assessed as important to the community and context in which the CSO operates.

> *Compliance has created a new organisation; there is no doubt that there has been significant cost. Discretionary income now needs to be allocated to compliance. This means that discretionary income that previously was available is now lost and this has a distinct impact on autonomy.*

The drain on discretionary funds is currently exacerbated by the global financial crisis as discretionary funding pools have been diminished by losses in investments. While this is not linked in any way to compliance, in a low funding availability environment, any drain on discretionary funding becomes problematic for the growth and, in some instances, sustainability of the CSO.

In terms of growth and development, participants assessed that capacity for ongoing change and innovation is an important part of the service delivery cycle. Respondents identified that the resource constraints currently facing their agencies were such that there was limited capacity to actively pursue areas identified as needing change. There was a very strong sense amongst participants that the reform agenda needs to be conceptualised as a formative and evolving process if long term change is to be achieved. There was a commitment to this ideal however there was also a corresponding view that resource constraints limited the capacity for proactive action.

> *There is a sense at the government level, a feeling that the job has been done – there is no acknowledgement that the sector is not resourced to do the job in line with expectations of the reform agenda. The worst case scenario is that the reform agenda may collapse because of lack of resourcing.*

> *Can't see a lot of changes beyond the requirement for registration. The principles are fantastic but on the ground the actual delivery isn't changing because of resource issues…lots more accountability but not enough foundational work to support change… (need to) stop talking rhetoric and start providing the resources and the support to make it happen seamlessly.*

This view was reinforced within written questionnaire feedback with comments such as:

Written comment:

> *Notion of earlier intervention difficult with limited resources.*

> *Lack of funding and workload increases attached to implementation make it difficult to follow up on some of the key areas that need it.*

The lack of capacity to take a proactive and systemic approach to meeting the needs of complex families means that CSOs struggle to move beyond crisis management and into the type of service system that meets the goal of the reform agenda.

In terms of sustainability, participants assessed that the impact of the resource drain arising from the compliance regime was likely to result in a restructure of the service system with smaller agencies needing to consider their capacity for continued involvement in service delivery. One of the CSOs involved in the research highlighted the example of a small regional agency with which they had worked which had ceased involvement in the sector as a direct result of compliance requirements. All other senior managers reinforced that this trend is likely to continue and expand as a direct result of the resource drain caused by compliance. This was an issue that was also flagged within written questionnaire data.

These findings highlight the need for a cost benefit analysis to be undertaken of the compliance process and for a detailed assessment to be undertaken to measure the impact of resource diversion on service delivery and innovation within the sector.

A final theme to emerge from the data specific to resources and compliance related to perceived resource inequities between the government and non government sector linked to implementation of the reform agenda. There was a consistent assessment made in questionnaire data, and through the interview process, that there were inequities exist at the regional level in resourcing to manage the system changes brought about through the reform agenda. Questionnaire feedback on this issue identified that 66% of respondents believed that there had not been comparable levels of funding provided between government and non government sector agencies while statements such as the following capture the views expressed during the interview process and in questionnaires:

> *The gap between the CSOs and DHS is enormous, the power base of the bureaucracy has grown and the resources of the CSOs are being seriously diminished by the paper trail rather than a high level of choice in regard to the type of support being offered to families.*

Written comment:

> *Implementation took place at a different pace within DHS and CSOs*

This perception has implications for enhanced working relationships between DHS and CSOs at a regional level, particularly when a goal of the reform agenda promotes the notion of partnership. This is one of the issues that should be considered as part of the process of building 'shared space'.

3.2.3 Compliance, Organisational Management and Autonomy

A number of issues relating to the impact of compliance on organisational management have already been raised in previous sections of this report. As the voluntary board is the governance mechanism for the CSO, feedback was also sought from boards of management/governance in relation to organisational management within the context of compliance.

The data collected from boards of management/governance, using a questionnaire, provided some valuable insights into compliance and organisational management from the perspective of the board.

There was a notable difference in levels of understanding of the scope of the reforms between CSO staff and board members. Only 39% of board respondents indicated a good to excellent understanding of the reform process with 29% having a moderate understanding and 32% indicating that their understanding was only basic/negligible. This is not an unexpected outcome as many of the reforms relate to practice issues which are not the domain of governance however this difference may highlight a need for some additional education and support to board members on the scope of the reforms.

In regard to the regulatory regime, the assessment from board respondents was consistently positive, with a strong level of support for the change process as it related to governance. Board respondents identified that the compliance regime had drawn boards into organisational management in a way that had not occurred in the past and had supported the development of more foundational knowledge of governance processes. Some concerns were raised around the long term viability of expecting voluntary boards to take on the level of responsibility associated with management of the CSO in the reform environment. Concerns were also raised in relation to the issue of CSO carrying risk, and a sense that there remains a lack of clarity around where boards sit on the risk continuum. Further discussion on the issue of risk is provided in the following and final section of this report however it is acknowledged that no data are currently available on the issue of risk as it relates to boards of management/governance. Board members have some increased perceptions of vulnerability around this issue and this factor was assessed by some board members, and by CEOs, as having an impact in terms of loss of membership to boards.

> *It does put pressure on the BOM and they have become frightened about risk management. The shift of risk makes BOM much more vulnerable and very uncertain about where they sit on the risk pendulum and yet it is their job to manage risk; a big ask for a voluntary BOM. Some things are so difficult and BOM are unclear about how much they need to do.*

Attrition rates of board members arising from the reforms were not measured in this research project however it is an area that would benefit from additional research into the future.

The impacts of the regulatory regime were measured against a number of variables specific to governance including organisational risk management, standards and governance enhancement.

As set out in Table 6, there was a strong sense that the governance process had strengthened board capacity to better address their governance responsibilities at a number of levels with the assessments presented in the Table further supported by the written comments accompanying questionnaires.

Table 6: Compliance and the Board of Management

Governance Enhancement Area	% Yes	% Negligible/ Uncertain	% No
Capacity to better address: Organisational Threats	73	10	17
Risk Management	80	16	4
Meeting standards accreditation	80	5	15
Setting strategic direction	73	12	15
Maintain Board autonomy	12	17	71
Enhance governance role	66	22	12

Written comments:

Providing more information which clarifies our responsibilities.

Generally improved governance.

The Act has provided clear direction and role clarity for the Board.

Has identified areas of weakness/ for improvement which allows for ongoing development toward optimum performance.

Raised awareness of issues of governance and caused me to reflect on my role.

The legislation has required the organisation to address its governance responsibilities in the context of the Act.

While results overall were positive, the issue of whether compliance had been effective in supporting boards in the maintenance of organisational autonomy through discretionary decision-making raised some questions. Of those who responded to the questionnaire, only 12% felt that the reforms and compliance had had no impact on organisational autonomy. A significant 71% assessed that the reforms had impacted on organisational autonomy, while the rest remained uncertain.

Concerns relating to the loss of autonomy as a result of regulatory requirements were also raised by senior managers involved in interviews. Participants from both the board and CSO management assessed that the prescriptive nature of the regulatory framework had resulted in a significant loss of autonomy.

It was assessed consistently that the government, in working to achieve transparency and quality through regulation had minimised the capacity for governance flexibility and management control.

> *Nothing seems to surpass the 'bottom covering' stage… we have much less autonomy …Always needing to check with DHS – less flexibility and more accountability but not in a positive way.*

The issue of loss of autonomy is further exacerbated by the fact that many CSOs need to meet regulatory requirements across a number of funding pools – both state and commonwealth. All funding has regulatory requirements and the need to meet these concurrently was assessed as having further diminished the capacity agencies for autonomy in governance and management.

Some work has been undertaken to develop corporate standards (such as with HASS and the governance elements of those standards) however there continues to be a range of regulatory requirements for CSO that are perceived to diminishing the capacity of organisational flexibility and autonomy.

> *If you put all of the standards together for each agency it would cover a board room table… We must find some commonality if we are to survive.*

> *We have so many diverse standards and regulation. There is no time for anything but meeting standards and doing what they say – autonomy ha???. We need a set of corporate standards.*

This issue is further complicated by, as identified previously, the diminishing pool of discretionary funding that previously provided an alternative mechanism for flexibility in service delivery.

3.2.4 Summary of Key Findings of Relevance to Section 3.2

Analysis of the interview and questionnaire data specific to the impacts of compliance highlighted a number of significant key learnings. These were:

- There is a clear recognition that regulation and compliance are an important part of organisational management with service standards consistently identified as necessary, particularly within a system introducing significant changes such as those occurring through the reform agenda. This acknowledgement was tempered with concerns that standards attainment is, in itself, promoted as the key measure of quality practice. The prescriptive nature of the Registration Standards and the intrinsic linking of standards to quality failed to accommodate traditional concepts of professionalisation and worker support needs inherent to working in the complex child and family welfare service system.
- Compliance demands are impacting negatively on the sector across a variety of domains. Compliance is resource intensive, requires a significant use of worker time and is impacting on levels of worker satisfaction. Workers consistently identified that time and resources spent on compliance are

impacting on their capacity to work with service users. Managers raised concerns that compliance is emerging as one of the factors influencing levels of worker recruitment and retention. The scope of the reform agenda and the range of changes needing to be absorbed concurrently by agencies (LAC, CRIS/SP, registration, new legislative regimes) have had significant resource implications that have not been catered for within the funding regime. Without a review of this issue, participants assessed that the system is locked into crisis management. The additional costs of compliance are now being met from CSO discretionary funds. The impact of this has increased significantly due to the global economic climate and the decrease in funds fluidity for agencies. The end result of this has been a diminished capacity to introduce innovation and decreased flexibility in providing new services. The estimation has been that between 7 -10 % of funding is being used to run the compliance regime.

- Compliance requirements are assessed as likely to impact on the capacity of small agencies within the sector. Feedback provided indicated that small agencies are giving consideration to pulling out of service delivery due to the cost and worker burden of the compliance regime.
- Concerns were raised in regard to perceived resource inequities between the government and non government sector linked to implementation of the reform agenda. This issue is closely aligned to the notion of partnership and 'shared space'. Perceived resource inequity for implementation of the reform agenda provides an additional barrier to relationship building between government and the CSO.
- The regulatory framework was assessed as having impacted organisationally through a significant loss of autonomy. While boards of management/ governance assessed that the reform agenda had strengthened board member understanding of the governance process they also identified it had negatively impacted on the capacity of the board to set the agenda. This is particularly pertinent where the CSO often needs to manage a range of standards from a broad range of funding sources.

3.3 Risk Impacts for the CSO

A clear theme to surface during the data collection and analysis process related to the issue of risk and risk assessment. Interview participants raised this issue as one which had emergent implications for the practice environment and for the CSO. The fact that the reforms are still in the early stages of implementation and that the resolution of questions/concerns may be addressed in the longer term was recognised by participants. Acknowledging this, it remains important to present research findings relating to risk and the CSO. The central focus of feedback on this issue related to risk management and its impact on: workforce structure; resourcing; and transfer of risk.

The establishment of CHILD First and community based intake, while strongly supported and promoted across the child and family welfare sector, has impacted

on the traditional role of Family Services workers. The shift in intake to include risk assessment is a significant one for workers. The necessity of the shift is acknowledged and accepted however the data collection process has identified that transition has created some difficulties for workers.

> *With change there is a stronger emphasis on assessment skill; a very hard adjustment for workers with a shift in emphasis from intake to managing risk.*

Role redefinition has needed to occur at a number of levels as workers have moved to accommodate statutory requirements while maintaining the strengths based approach that has characterised practice for the CSO worker in the past.

It is acknowledged that the reform agenda is underpinned by a commitment to a strengths based philosophy (DHS 2007a; 2007b; 2007c) however research participants identified that cultural differences at the organisational level have made the marriage of statutory and family focused practice a difficult one.

> *CSOs come from a strengths-based perspective where DHS has historically been more punitive. The joint training has highlighted this with CP clearly trained for risk management – come at it from a deficit approach…[this creates a] tension between a partnership approach and risk aversion.*

At the practice level this tension impacts on workforce structure with Family Services managers and team leaders reporting a sense amongst staff that the bulk of the work undertaken must be focused on much more complex cases and situations than previously. As a result of this shift, ALL interview participants providing feedback on the Family Services workforce consistently identified that:

- The focus of Family Services work has shifted to be with much more complex cases; families at the 'sharp end' of the service system.
- There is a diminished capacity within Family Services to find the time to work with less complex cases; thereby limiting the ability for earlier intervention and prevention. This is despite the fact that earlier intervention and prevention is a key goal of the reform agenda.
- Family Services worker roles are shifting to stronger risk assessment and this has implications for worker recruitment and retention as workers choose to move away from the complexity and interventive nature of that type of work.

The following excerpts of interview capture these views in the words of research participants:

> *Lots of people feel that service delivery is now only focused on the sharp end. Workers are feeling as though they are locked into being statutory*

workers… much greater level of statutory intervention and an expansion in the number of children subject to statutory orders.

Workers feel the system is too hard and this is having a distinct impact on work retention; it is not sustainable in the long term and people are choosing to go elsewhere.

Written comment:

More focus on child protection work and less time for therapeutic work and huge increase in paper work.

The shift in the focus of Family Services to the 'sharp end' has implications at a number of levels for the CSO. At one level it means that children and young people who would previously have been taken into the statutory system are now being 'held'. This is assessed as increasing levels of risk for both the child/young person and for the CSO. Team leaders from five out of the seven Family Services agencies involved in the research indicated that they were 'holding' children/young people who were at significant risk.

A recurrent theme across interviews was a view that there was an increased transfer of risk, with cases that were previously managed by child protection being picked up by Family Services, despite the fact that it was not in the best interests of the child to remain with the family.

Has become a bit of a release valve for child protection. There has been no real shift for child protection but a real shift for Family Services.

DHS are so into risk management… The result is that kids in the system don't take on any risk while those being 'held' are sometimes at very high risk

Organisationally participants assessed that CSOs are carrying risk at a level that has not occurred in the past. The impact this has on agency and board liability, as well as for workers in regard to vicarious trauma, burnout, retention and morale, is yet to be measured. The capacity of the CSO to manage the transfer of risk through professional and governance skill development, adequate and appropriate debriefing for workers and organisational risk management strategies is unclear at this point of reform implementation.

At the service user level the transfer of risk means that families with less complex issues now struggle to receive a service. Participants assessed that the system is not providing chronic families with the support they need which has implications for principles of earlier intervention. There was no assessment made by any of the participants that community based intake was a flawed concept but rather that existing resourcing is insufficient to meet the current levels of need. This resource shortfall is forcing a focus on acute and complex cases. Again the long term implications of this situation are yet to be measured.

Initial analysis of figures for the 2007/2008 financial year in one region involved in the research indicate that there had been a 15% re-referral rate for families to Family Services. This type of re referral gives rise to questions around whether the trend for re notifications that characterised protective interventions in the past may be shifting to Family Services. Further research is needed on this issue to measure the extent to which targeting the service toward the most vulnerable leaves many struggling families without the support they would have received in the past.

Participants were clear on the need for adequate resourcing to address this issue as a matter of priority for the sector:

> *The shift to risk management has meant that resources are stretched; layer upon layer of expectations in regard to working with families at a time when there are a concurrent less number of carers in the system.*

> *Can't manage the needs of complex families in the new environment because of resource issues.*

> *Has become much more like crisis management and resources do not allow for the kind of structure needed to deal with the issues – in real terms in means greater accountability and a much higher focus on risk management*

In summary, this is an area that clearly requires further research to review and consolidate these initial indicators relating to risk and to measure the impact of these factors on the attainment of the aims of the reform agenda.

3.3.3 Summary of Key Findings of Relevance to Section 3.3

The key concerns arising in the research in relation to risk related to:

- The stronger emphasis on assessment skill for Family Services workers. This has been a very hard adjustment for workers with a shift in emphasis from intake to managing risk.
- The focus on complex cases. Service delivery is now more focused on complex cases with a significant number of participants indicating that workers are feeling as though they are locked into working as statutory workers. There is a much greater level of statutory intervention and an expansion in the number of children subject to statutory orders. This represents a shift in risk and responsibility to CSOs with a resultant impact in terms of burnout, problems with vicarious trauma, recruitment, retention and staff morale.
- The impact on service users. As identified, the clients accessing family services have more complex needs and the resources needed to deal with this level of complexity are not available. The result of this was assessed as being that services are being targeted toward the most vulnerable and leaving many struggling families without support they would have received in the past.

4. Research Conclusions and Recommendations

The research results provided within this report represent the perceptions of a range of key informants across participating organisations. The research process has sought to map the emerging outcomes of the reform agenda from the perspective of these stakeholders, and provide an accurate representation, through the mechanism of thematic analysis, of these views.

The data provides effective insights into the emergent strengths of the reforms. It highlights that the system continues to grapple with retention of control and traditional notions of the purchaser/provider. It provides insights into some unintended outcomes of the reforms in terms of resourcing and impacts on the workforce, on service users and on the broader service system.

It is research that needs to be considered within the contextual framework that currently shapes the child and family welfare sector. The recently allocated $134.6 million to Out of Home Care through the State budget is likely to reshape the practice environment in a number of ways with the introduction of specialist practitioners, therapeutic services and residential service upgrades. The evaluation by KPMG will provide currently unavailable system wide insights into the impacts of the reforms. These are all changes to be acknowledged as potentially beneficial to the change process. They are also changes that may address some of the issues /concerns raised within this report.

It also needs to be acknowledged that there are a number of areas that require further research. The longer term impacts of the reforms on boards of management/governance, the implications for Family Services of emergent trends relating to risk (organisational, worker and service user), resourcing and compliance issues and the variation in perceptions of the reforms between Out of Home Care and Family Services are all areas that need to be examined in a level of greater detail, and across a longer timeframe, than has been possible with this project. Initial indicators are that there have been significant impacts that have implications in terms of worker recruitment and retention, Boards of Management and agency autonomy.

The need for further research and the need for the introduction of a number of other initiatives, as identified through this research, are detailed in the following recommendations

Recommendation 1

That further research be undertaken to track emergent variations in the assessments made by the Out of Home Care and Family Services sectors on the value of the reform agenda, particularly the Best Interests Framework, in enhancing practice. This research should explore variations in:

1. perceptions around how the work undertaken by the different sectors is valued;
2. the implementation and integration of diverse practice management tools (i.e. Best Interests Planning and Looking After Children) within these sectors; and,
3. practice approaches used.

A key aim of this research would be to develop a greater understanding of the impacts of these variations on service system outcomes.

Recommendation 2

That the Department of Human Services, in consultation with the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, review existing strategies for the promotion of inter-sectoral involvement in implementation of the reform agenda. This is to determine any additional education and support needs for secondary and universal service providers as part of the facilitation of service system integration, in line with the goals of the child and family welfare reform agenda.

Recommendation 3

That the Department of Human Services include the monitoring/measurement of service system integration in their current and ongoing evaluation of the reform process. This will facilitate the measurement of current and ongoing inter sectoral education and support needs as they relate to the reforms.

Recommendation 4

That senior management from the Department of Human Services and Community Service Organisations develop a strategy to address barriers to partnership building within the child and family welfare sector. This strategy should include processes to enhance notions of 'shared space' and approaches to overcome embedded views relating to traditional perceptions of the purchaser/provider relationship. This strategy should be developed with the capacity for implementation across all DHS regions.

Recommendation 5

That a cost-benefit analysis be undertaken of the compliance process. The results of this should be used to inform a structured assessment of the impact of resource diversion for compliance on the capacity of the CSO to maintain levels of service delivery and pursue innovation within the child and family welfare sector.

Recommendation 6

That further research be undertaken over a three year timeframe, and with an extended agency participant pool, to examine the following areas identified as requiring further study:

- The measurement of consistent and sustained changes in service outcomes linked to the reforms. This should occur across the range of organisational barriers and enablers flagged within this preliminary research as shaping CSO

capacity to achieve enhanced service outcomes. As part of this process it should be recognised that the KPMG evaluation data specific to service outcomes has potential to provide a data pool to supplement this research.

- Boards of management/governance. This should focus on the measurement of the impacts of the reform agenda on issues of board autonomy, burden of risk and attrition rates.
- Risk and risk aversion. This should focus on the issue of risk, with the aim of tracking the impact of risk on the CSO workforce. It should include an examination of workforce culture, worker recruitment and retention, role satisfaction and burnout as well as professional development provision/needs. It should consider the issue of transfer of risk to the CSO and the impact of this transfer to service outcomes.

The extended participant pool should include agencies based in metropolitan as well as regional locations to maximise the insights gained across a range of geographical locations.

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