

# Working Families Program



## Work and Family Balance in Regional Victoria A Pilot Project

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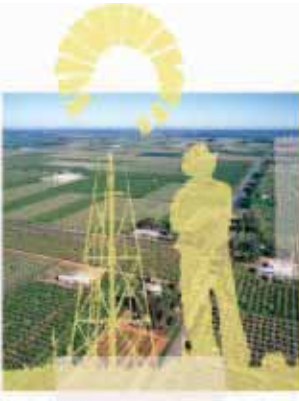
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# Executive Summary

## 1.1

### Project Background

Balancing work and family responsibilities is an increasingly significant concern not only for individual employees, their families and the broader community, but also for government and local communities.

However little attention has been paid to the different ways in which constraints and opportunities for work and family balance operate across industry in regional and rural Australia or how these differences might affect employee work and family balance outcomes. Nor has there been any detailed analysis of the ways in which local infrastructure, such as the operating hours of local services including kindergartens, public transport and local government services, might support or frustrate better work and family balance.

A regional focus is important because work and family balance for individual workers and or working families is dependent on many background economic and social forces outside the family or household. These include:

- > The structure of job opportunities in a particular area, such as the strength of labour demand and the configuration of dominant industries and skill requirements;
- > The availability of public and private infrastructure such as transport, education and training, childcare and aged care; and
- > Specific employment benefits and workplace conditions that the worker experiences in his or her job, eg the number of hours, schedules, wages, leave provisions, and the nature of supervision.

The recent implementation of the Federal Government's wide ranging policy and legislative changes in industrial relations and its welfare to work reforms are expected to further intensify the challenges faced by working families in balancing work and family. Much depends on the response of employers. It remains uncertain the extent to which, and how quickly, WorkChoices will influence employers' decisions with respect to wages and conditions.

## 1.2

### The Pilot Project

**'Work and Family Balance in Regional Victoria: a Pilot Project'** was funded by Industrial Relations Victoria (IRV) and Regional Development Victoria (RDV) in February 2006. This Project is an exploratory study and focuses on four Victorian regional areas – Bendigo, Colac, Horsham and Latrobe City.

In each of these areas, the Project aims were to identify:

- > Major industry and employment characteristics as well as regional socio-demographic characteristics that might impact on work and family balance;
- > Key infrastructure and local services that might support better work and family balance for local families;
- > Key local work and family issues in relation to the challenges facing workers and those wanting to undertake paid work, families and employers in combining work and family responsibilities.

The Project draws on an analysis of available statistical data to identify major regional socio-demographic, industry and employment characteristics that might impact on work and family balance. It also draws on consultation with key stakeholders and employee focus groups together with input from regional forums held to provide feedback on the Project findings and possible local options to better support work family balance for working families in each of the areas.

**The Project research was undertaken by the Centre for Applied Social Research (CASR) at RMIT University, which also drew on work undertaken for the Project by WWW Communications and Auspoll. The research process was overseen by a steering committee comprising representatives from Industrial Relations Victoria, Regional Development Victoria and the Department for Victorian Communities. This Project report makes recommendations which will be considered by the Victorian Government.**

# 1.3

## Key Project Findings

The Project data analysis and consultation highlighted a number of distinctive factors that shape the experience of work and family balance in the regional areas of Colac, Bendigo, Horsham and Latrobe City. In many ways these factors make working families in these areas more vulnerable to work and family *imbalance*.

### 1.3.1 Working families and caring responsibilities

Many families in the four regional areas have both paid work and caring responsibilities. As in Melbourne, the importance of the traditional 'breadwinner' family model has declined and now comprises less than one quarter of all couple families with children. Most couple families with children have both parents in the paid work force, while a significant number of parents in single parent households with children are also engaged in paid work. For couple families the most common work arrangements of the parents is a 'one-and-a-half earner model' where one partner is in full-time paid work while the other is engaged in part-time work.

In all four regional areas, a smaller proportion of the population is of working age (15-65 years) than is the case for metropolitan Melbourne. This implies a higher 'dependency ratio' and suggests that caring responsibilities within families, both for elder dependents and children, are likely to be significant in all these areas.

### 1.3.2 Work, family and community balance

There is growing awareness of the issue of work and family balance in the regional areas studied. Balancing work and family is seen as 'quality' time at home. Members of the employee focus groups held in these four areas talked about 'juggling work and family commitments' and being 'pressed for time'.

One of the distinctive features of this 'juggle' in regional Victoria is concerned with volunteering – seen as essential in providing services and in adding to the quality of community life. Increasing hours at work or irregular schedules mean it is harder to meet important community responsibilities, such as membership of the local Country Fire Authority. Indeed many of those consulted argued that the juggle for working families in regional areas is not just between work and family, but between *work, family and community*.

### 1.3.3 Labour markets

There is a weaker level of labour demand (particularly evident in Bendigo and Latrobe City), in particular reflected in a relative shortage of full-time job opportunities. This makes it harder for families to succeed in choosing the mix of jobs (and the mix of distribution of caring responsibilities) that they might prefer. The consultations and focus groups pointed to this issue of *underemployment* and its link with work and family imbalance. That is, work and family imbalance is not only caused by *too much* paid work but also by *too little*.

There is a narrower structure of labour demand, with a limited range of industries and businesses and a narrower base of skill requirements in the four areas. This means there are fewer opportunities to move jobs and fewer opportunities for career advancement. This is true for both skilled and less skilled workers, and it can foster high levels of dependence on the goodwill of the current employer.

There would appear to be a general shortfall in employment opportunities in the four regional areas, although a number of employers pointed to distinct differences between the labour markets for skilled and unskilled work. Both limited employment opportunities and a mismatch between demands for skill and labour supply are supported by data that indicate that in all four areas there is a relative absence of tertiary educated members of the community, a relative absence of professionals in employment and a greater proportion of the working age population that draws on some form of income support. These factors also help explain the markedly lower family incomes in the regional areas studied.

### 1.3.4 Work and family infrastructure

The data points to substantial needs for supportive infrastructure of childcare and elder care as well as family-friendly practices at the workplace to help workers with the juggle between work, family and community.

Infrastructure provision such as childcare, transport and education and training appears weaker in non-metropolitan areas. The consultations and focus groups raised the issue of childcare, with problems of lack of provision as well as affordability and quality emerging in all areas. Transport was also seen as a major issue, because of the distances that workers must travel to access suitable jobs, the lack of public transport and high petrol prices. Concern was also expressed about access to post school education and training, both for the skilled and less skilled groups, including women returning to work after a period out of the labour force because of caring responsibilities.

# 1.4

## Options for Action

At the workplace, flexibility and employer 'give and take' was what many employees in the focus groups wanted to assist their balance between work and family, as well as an acknowledgement by employers that employees had responsibilities outside the workplace. While part-time work can provide an important mechanism to manage work and family responsibilities, the general conditions of much of the part-time work available were also seen to be inadequate and *family-unfriendly*. In the consultation process, a number of good employment practices and good employers were cited. However, they were seen to be the exceptions rather than the norm. Casual work, shift work and inconsistent and fluctuating hours in particular were seen to make the work and family balance more of a struggle, particularly when trying to fit around the working hours of partners.

### 1.3.5 Impact of WorkChoices

The weaker level and structure of labour demand and the scarcity of full-time jobs in the regional areas makes working families more dependent on their current full-time or part-time jobs. This in turn means that individuals and families are more vulnerable to changes such as those recently introduced via WorkChoices.

While some anecdotal information was provided in the consultations about changes in working conditions following the introduction of WorkChoices, none of those in the employee focus groups had themselves experienced any definite changes. Many, however, expressed considerable disquiet about the potential effect of future changes that they believed would lead to greater casualisation, poorer pay rates, less job security and increased power to employers at the expense of families. It was felt that any loss of penalty payments for overtime or work during unsocial hours would lead to a loss of income or being forced to seek a second job. Parents were also particularly concerned for the employment futures of their children. Many were worried about the impact of WorkChoices on already highly casualised youth labour markets and feared that this might accelerate the drift of young people away from regional areas. The Federal Government changes were also seen as adding to the existing pressures that were discouraging volunteering in the local community through any changes that led to longer and/ or more unpredictable hours.

There is a case for State government and local action to develop a specific work and family agenda to support working families in regional Victoria. The Project identified a number of 'islands' of good practice around flexible 'family-friendly' workplace arrangements and local infrastructure and support services. At a formal level, however, more needs to be done in the four regional communities to strategically consider ways to support workers with family responsibilities, engage employers in changing practice and to systematically develop appropriate community services or practices as essential work and family balance underpinnings. This is particularly crucial given the potential for aspects of the recent federal WorkChoices legislation to negatively impact on work and family balance.

Options for action that the Victorian Government, in collaboration with other levels of government, business, unions or community organisations, might usefully consider to improve work and life balance in regional Victoria are set out in the four main areas below.

### 1.4.1 Education and Information

- > **Option 1** Raise Awareness of Work and Family Balance as a Community Issue
- > **Option 2** Develop an Employer Information Kit
- > **Option 3** Facilitate Employer Action to Promote Work & Family Balance
- > **Option 4** Promote Employee Rights
- > **Option 5** Develop an Employee Information Kit

### 1.4.2 Development and Promotion of Good Practice

- > **Option 6** Promote Existing Local Good Practice Models
- > **Option 7** Support Innovation: Partnership Projects

### 1.4.3 Better Government, Community and industry Linkages

- > **Option 8** Promote Responsive Family Day Care
- > **Option 9** Investigate Employee Use of Community Transport
- > **Option 10** Investigate More Responsive Local Government Services

### 1.4.4 Monitoring and Further Research

- > **Option 11** Build on the Pilot Project
- > **Option 12** Monitor Industrial Relations Changes in Regional Areas



# Introduction

## 2.0

Balancing work and family responsibilities is an increasingly significant concern not only for individual employees, their families and the broader community, but also for government and local communities. The recent implementation of the Federal Government's wide ranging policy and legislative changes in industrial relations and of its welfare to work reforms is expected to further intensify the challenges faced by working families in balancing work and family (Pocock 2005; Edgar 2005).

Although there is increasing research devoted to investigating various aspects of work and family balance, little attention has been paid to the different ways in which such constraints and opportunities operate for workers with family responsibilities across industry in regional and rural Australia or how these differences might affect employee work and family balance outcomes. Nor has there been any detailed analysis of the ways in which local infrastructure, such as the operating hours of local services including kindergartens, public transport and local government services, might support or frustrate better work and family balance.

In Victoria, a better understanding of the regional dimensions of work and family balance was seen as important in enhancing the State government's policy responses to the challenges faced by Victorian working families to complement work already in progress such as the Action Agenda for Work & Family Balance and the Better Work & Family Balance Grants program. To that end Industrial Relations Victoria (IRV) and Regional Development Victoria (RDV) decided to jointly fund a pilot Project entitled 'Work and Family Balance in Regional Victoria' in February 2006.

This Project is an exploratory study and focuses on four Victorian regional areas – Bendigo, Colac, Horsham and Latrobe City. In each of these areas the Project aimed to identify:

- > Major industry and employment characteristics as well as regional socio-demographic characteristics that might impact on work and family balance;
- > Key infrastructure and local services that might support better work and family balance for local families;
- > Key local work and family issues in relation to the challenges facing workers and those wanting to undertake paid work, families and employers in combining work and family responsibilities; and
- > Existing and potential models at the local level that can assist better work and family balance in Victorian regional communities.

Given the recent federal industrial relations changes, the Project also sought to provide an early indication of any differential impact these changes have on work and family balance in rural and regional Victoria.

### **The Project had four main phases:**

1. Preparation of 'data snapshots' from available Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2001 Census and other data for each of the regional areas and the broader regions statistical divisions in which the areas are located. These snapshots identify the major regional socio-demographic, industry and employment characteristics and differences that might impact on work and family balance.
2. Consultation with key stakeholders in each of the four regional areas including those from local government, employer associations, unions, community organisations and service providers to identify the:
  - > Key characteristics of the region which might support or frustrate work and family balance;
  - > Opportunities for enhanced work and family balance;
  - > Barriers to better work and family balance; and
  - > Possible options to better support businesses, working families, individual workers and those wishing or needing to undertake paid work to achieve work and family balance.

3. Employee focus groups in each of the four regional areas to identify:
  - > The different ways workplace conditions and benefits operate for workers with family responsibilities across industry in rural and regional Victoria;
  - > How these differences affect the ability of employees to balance their work and family responsibilities; and
  - > Any differential impact the federal industrial relations changes may have on working families in rural and regional Victoria.
4. Regional forums in each of the four regional areas to provide feedback on the Project findings from Phases 1-3 and to provide input into possible local options and models to support better work family balance for working families in each of the areas.

The Project research has been undertaken by Dr Sara Charlesworth, Dr Iain Campbell and Warren Fridell from the Centre of Applied Social Research (CASR) at RMIT University. Ethics approval was granted for the Project from the RMIT University Design and Social Context Portfolio Ethics Committee. The research was complemented by work undertaken by Lynne Wannan and Marion Webster, WWW Communications, in Phase 2 and by Sue Loukomitis, Auspoll, in Phase 3. The RDV Regional Managers, Rural Community Development Officers and Business Development Officers in each of the four regional areas also provided important points of contact for the stakeholder consultations and the regional forums.

The Project was overseen by a steering committee whose members included:

- > Dr Sharon Winocur, Director Policy & Strategy, IRV
- > Leonie Morgan, Senior Policy Adviser – Work & Family, IRV
- > Kaye Owen, Executive Director, Regional Strategy and Co-ordination, RDV
- > Robert Jones, Executive Director Operations, RDV
- > Cara Jillamen, Policy Adviser, RDV
- > Elizabeth Sinclair, Policy Manager, Employment Programs, Department for Victorian Communities.





# Project Background: W & F Balance and Regions

## 3.0

In this section we briefly outline the concept of work and family balance. We stress the importance of taking a regional approach to better understanding the dynamics of work and family balance. We also outline the dimensions of recent changes in employment regulation as background to our analysis in Section 4 of their potential impact on the constraints and opportunities for work family balance in the regional areas. All these issues are set out in greater depth in Appendix 1.

## 3.1

### What is work and family balance?

'Work and family balance', or – as it sometimes called – work/life balance, is increasingly prominent in policy debates in Australia and in other industrialised countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The notion of 'work and family balance' however needs a brief explanation. 'Work' means paid work, that is, employment. The notion of 'family' is generally accepted as including caring and other responsibilities for dependents both within and outside the household. A useful definition of work and family balance is provided by Russell and Bowman (2000, 5), who suggest it is to do with 'the desire to have access to employment opportunities and earn an adequate income while at the same time looking after the caring responsibilities of family life'. A similar definition was used by many participants in the focus groups conducted in regional Victoria in the course of this Project. For most participants a 'good' work and family balance was one that allowed them to work their job and also to spend 'real' and 'quality' time with their families. This was defined as time they could 'enjoy' and during which they were not 'tired' or 'stressed out' from work.

For individual workers or working families, the immediate issue is often work and family *imbalance*. The most common term in Australia is 'juggling', conveying a sense of juggling too many disparate activities that are almost, but not quite out of control (Pocock, 2001, 5). Members of the focus groups in regional Victoria readily identified with concepts such as 'juggling work and family commitments' and being 'pressed for time'. This notion of 'juggling' or 'finding time' was sometimes preferred by focus group participants to the more abstract term, 'work and family balance'.

## 3.2

### The importance of looking at regions

Why is a regional focus important? Work and family balance is usually experienced and assessed at the individual level. However, the quality of work and family balance, that is, whether it is good or bad, is dependent on numerous background economic and social forces outside the family or household. Many of these forces are bound up with geographical location and place. From the point of view of an individual worker (or potential worker) residing in a household in a particular location, the quality of work and family balance will be dependent in particular on three sets of forces.

While they overlap in practice, it is useful to distinguish these forces for the purposes of this Project:

- > The structure of job opportunities in a particular area, for example, the strength of labour demand and the configuration of dominant industries and skill requirements;
- > The availability of public and private infrastructure such as transport, education and training, childcare and aged care; and
- > Specific employment benefits and workplace conditions that the worker experiences in his or her job, for example, the number of hours, schedules, wages, leave provisions, and the nature of supervision.

What conditions workers need and want will depend on their precise circumstances. But in general the seven features outlined by Pocock (2005, 7) are important:

- > A living wage, with some predictability and security and the opportunity to live free of financial stress;
- > Security of employment which is vital to family formation;
- > Adequate, predictable and common family time;
- > Flexible working conditions that allow workers to deal with unexpected or predictable family needs, including the opportunity to change working time (for example to part-time work);
- > The avoidance of excessive working hours;
- > Adequate paid and unpaid leave to deal with personal and family sickness, birth, early parenting, death and other times of intensive family care or incident; and
- > Quality, accessible, affordable childcare.

## 3.3

### Changing labour regulation and WorkChoices

Regulation shapes each of these forces, either directly or indirectly. The two most important sources of regulation are employers and governments (whether local, state or federal). The differing forms of regulation include employer rules and policies at the workplace, federal and state labour regulation, federal social security and tax policy, and state policies on transport and education and training (Gahan and Brosnan 2006; Howe, Johnstone and Mitchell 2006).

Both work and family balance and regulation have a spatial dimension. Households, workplaces and forms of infrastructure such as childcare are all firmly situated in distinct geographical places and combine to define a distinct pattern of opportunities and constraints for individuals and families. Regulation will also take slightly different forms and will also be implemented differently according to local circumstances and conditions. As a result we can expect patterns of work and family balance to look different in one location than in another and that therefore working families in one location may be *more vulnerable* or *less vulnerable* to imbalances than those in other locations.



The importance of looking at work and family balance in regional areas is underlined by the major changes currently taking place in labour regulation in Australia. McGrath-Champ (2005, see also 2002) argues that the shift in labour regulation away from centralised wage determination towards a more decentralised system, understood in terms of 'enterprise bargaining', has involved a re-scaling of industrial relations. She argues that this has led to uneven outcomes in different locations in Australia. For example, in contrast to the past, she suggests that the more decentralised system of the present is leading to lower wage rises in non-metropolitan Australia.

The process of decentralisation analysed by McGrath-Champ has been accelerated as a result of the recent changes in federal industrial relations legislation (WorkChoices). Researchers in the area have voiced concerns about the likely impact of these changes on wages and working conditions. They have pointed to the way in which WorkChoices opens up more opportunities for employers to improve their cost competitiveness by lowering the existing wages and conditions of their current employees, and imposing lower wages and conditions on new employees (see for example Briggs 2005).

This new legislation opens up significant risks for many employees. Much depends on the response of employers. It remains uncertain how many, how quickly, and in what way employers will take advantage of new opportunities to lower wages and conditions. Stewart (2006) suggests the initial impact on labour market arrangements will depend in particular on the attitude of employers. Concern about skill shortages in certain areas of the labour market could act as a countervailing pressure on any downward trend in wages and conditions, making employers 'wary of being seen to cut conditions for fear of being unable to attract or retain good staff' (Stewart 2006, 53-54). However, the key pressure on employers comes from pressures in the product markets, and there is a danger that competitive advantages secured by one employer as a result of reduced wages and conditions will drive other employers to follow suit (Briggs 2005).

The federal initiatives in labour regulation are supplemented by recent changes in social security policy, referred to as the 'Welfare to Work Package'. This imposes a work test on recipients of certain pensions and payments and ultimately seeks to move many of them on to the standard 'Newstart Allowance' designed for unemployed persons. The targeted groups include people with disabilities and sole parents, who are obliged to seek at least 15 hours paid work once their youngest child has turned six. The effect of these changes together with the introduction of WorkChoices is to break down the boundary between receipt of welfare benefits and participation in a low pay sector, creating a larger and larger pool of people who churn through low pay jobs, forced to continue to rely on supplements from the welfare system even when in jobs.



# Key Findings

## 4.0

In this section we start to take up the challenge of incorporating a spatial or regional dimension into the discussion of work and family balance in Victoria. We look at four 'regional areas' in non-metropolitan Victoria – Colac, Horsham, Latrobe City, Bendigo. In administrative terms these are four local government areas (Colac-Otway Shire, Horsham Rural City, Latrobe City, and Greater Bendigo), within larger regions located outside of the major metropolitan centre of Melbourne.

We concentrate on aggregate data, mainly from the 2001 Census, for the four selected regional areas (and Melbourne Statistical Division). The statistical data snapshots for the four Victorian regional areas are provided in full in Appendices 2 to 5. The data for Melbourne should not be interpreted as a benchmark for the standard. They are intended primarily to provide a common point of comparison, to supplement the direct comparison of one regional area with the other. This sharpens the analysis, allowing us both to identify more easily commonalities across the four regional areas (perhaps pointing to common elements of a general metropolitan versus non-metropolitan contrast) and differences amongst the four regional areas.

The aggregate data allow us to identify both the major socio-demographic characteristics and the major employment and industry characteristics that might impact on work and family balance. They are not as useful in generating a picture of the other forces that structure work and family balance, such as the availability of public and private infrastructure and employment benefits and workplace conditions. However, they can help to set the scene for consideration of these other two forces.

We stress that this analysis is based on a pilot study. It draws on analysis of available data including 2001 Census data, limited regional consultation with stakeholders and a small number of employee focus groups and thus our conclusions are indicative only. While the study enriches our understanding of work and family balance in these four regional areas and indeed our understanding of the spatial dimensions of work and family balance more generally, we have not been able to deal with all aspects of the topic, such as an examination of workplace conditions and benefits. That task requires further detailed research, including case study research, as we flag in Options 11 and 12 in Section 5.

## 4.1

### The importance of looking at regions

We start by considering the common elements in the four regional areas vis-à-vis metropolitan Melbourne, looking at socio-demographic characteristics, employment and industry characteristics, and the implications of the analysis for work and family balance.

#### 4.1.1 Socio-demographic characteristics

In 2001, the *age structure* of the population (see Table 1 and Figure 1) in all four areas shows a smaller proportion of young adults (20-35) compared to Melbourne. The shortfall is sharpest in Colac, where only 16.5 percent of the population is in the 20-35 year group, compared to 23.1 percent in Melbourne, but it is also marked for Horsham (17.4 percent), Latrobe City (18.5 percent) and Bendigo (19 percent). Conversely, the four areas tend to have a slightly higher share of the population in the school age and pre-school age groups (with Latrobe City displaying the highest proportions). Similarly, most of the areas (though not Latrobe City) have a higher proportion of the population in the post-retirement older age groups (65 years+). This suggests that concerns about an ageing population, and the associated need for more attention to elder care, are likely to be particularly pertinent in these three areas.

The shortfall in the proportion of young adults hints at the familiar problem of population drift, which is particularly strong for young people who move in search of better education and job opportunities. The drift away of young people disrupts family relations. It also has implications for work and family balance, by virtue of the fact that the age groups who remain in strong numbers are those with strongest family ties and family responsibilities. The smaller proportion of young adults in the population is linked to a smaller proportion of working age (15-64), especially in Colac and Horsham. This implies a higher 'dependency ratio' and it provides some *prima facie* evidence that caring responsibilities within families are likely to weigh heavily in these four areas, with caring responsibilities for children particularly prominent in Latrobe City and the issue of elder care looming largest in the other three regional areas.

The data on *family composition* (Table 4) show that couple families with children under 15 years are a similar proportion of all families in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. At the same time, single parent families with children under 15 represent a higher proportion of all families in all four

regional areas, with Latrobe City and Bendigo having the highest proportions. The data point to the presence of caring responsibilities for children that are at least as strong as in Melbourne, and perhaps even stronger given the higher concentration of one-parent families in the four regional areas.

#### 4.1.2 Major employment characteristics and job opportunities

The *educational attainment* of the population (see Tables 5 and 6) in all four regional areas is well below that evident for the population in Melbourne. For example, the proportion with post-school qualifications of a Bachelor or Postgraduate degree is dramatically lower and the proportion with a Diploma or Graduate Certificate is somewhat lower in all four areas. On the other hand, all four areas have a slightly higher proportion of the population with certificate level or trade qualifications. Educational attainment is not the same as skill, but these figures do hint at a different skill and industry structure in the regional areas, with less call for workers with tertiary qualifications.

Annual data on *unemployment rates* for statistical regions for the period from 1998 to 2005 (Table 7) have been drawn from the ABS Monthly Labour Force Survey. In 1998 unemployment rates were markedly higher for both men and women in the four relevant statistical regions, compared to Melbourne. Since 1998 the rates have tended to decline in all areas. In the case of men (though not women) in the four regions, the improvement is very strong, suggesting a convergence in employment conditions between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. These data undoubtedly indicate an improvement in labour market conditions since the late 1990s in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. They confirm the impression of strong jobs growth evident in the national economy. However, it would be wrong to place too much weight on such figures, which are recognised as increasingly inadequate in measuring labour slack since they fail to take into account hidden unemployment and underemployment.

A closer look at other data reveals some persistent differences in labour market performance that separate metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas (and also some intriguing differences amongst the four regional areas). Data on *employment rates by age and sex* (Table 8), which measure the proportion of the population in a particular group that is employed, touch on the issue of hidden unemployment. As noted above, the four regions have a smaller proportion of their population of working age. Here we can note that in at

least three of the regions the proportion of that group that is actually in employment is often smaller as well. In Melbourne 67.6 percent of males aged 15 + were in employment at the time of the last Census, as were 53.4 percent of females. There was little difference in Horsham, suggesting relatively strong job opportunities. In Colac, the shortfall was mainly in the case of females (only 50.0 percent employed). But in Latrobe City the employment rate both for men (59.2 percent) and women (44.6 percent) was markedly lower than Melbourne. Similarly there was a shortfall in Bendigo for both men (61.7 percent) and women (48.4 percent). These data provide a better indication than unemployment rates of the relative strength of the job opportunities available in a particular area. They point to weaknesses in particular in Latrobe City and Bendigo.

In talking about the strength of job opportunities in an area, it is also important to take into account whether jobs are full-time or part-time in duration (Table 9). This allows a partial approximation to the issue of underemployment (though of course not all part-time jobs can be seen to be underemployment). The major contrast with Melbourne is in relation to female employment. In all four regional areas the proportion of females employed who are employed part-time is relatively high. Whereas in Melbourne the proportion was 45.4 percent, it rises to 56.1 percent in Latrobe City, 54.1 percent in Bendigo, 52.6 percent in Horsham and 50.0 percent in Colac. This deepens the impression of an overall weakness in full-time job opportunities in Latrobe City and Bendigo, and it suggests that there are weaknesses for women in particular in Colac and Horsham. Not only is the proportion of people employed smaller in Latrobe City, Bendigo and Colac, but the employed women are less likely to be employed full-time.

We can note here that the weakness in job opportunities is primarily to do with full-time jobs. If we converted these data into full-time and part-time employment rates, we would see that the proportion of part-time job opportunities is much the same in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. The big shortfall in the regional areas is in connection with full-time jobs. This is true for men in Latrobe City and Bendigo. But it is most dramatically true for women in all four regional areas. The gap in some cases is surprisingly large, for example in Latrobe City where the proportion of women aged 15 and over that is employed full-time is less than two-thirds of the corresponding figure for Melbourne.

The employment structure in the four regional areas differs from that of Melbourne. The regional areas have a narrower range of *industries* (Table 11, Figure 3).

# 4.1

## The importance of looking at regions

Roughly summarised, employment in property and business services, finance and insurance and manufacturing tends to be lower than in Melbourne. On the other hand retail tends to assume greater prominence, and indeed it is the major industry in Latrobe City, Bendigo and Horsham. In terms of *major occupational groups* (Table 12, Figure 4), the major difference is the relative lack of professionals in the four regional areas in comparison to Melbourne.

### 4.1.3 Reliance on income support

Data on *income support 'customers'* for 2002 and 2003 (Table 13) come from a distinct ABS series. This category does not of course refer only to people who are not employed. Though many income support 'customers' are indeed not in employment, many others mix income support with employment, perhaps in part-time jobs. All four regional areas have a higher proportion of the population who draw on some form of income support than Melbourne. The contrast with Melbourne seems sharpest when the comparison refers to the proportion of the working age population. Not only do the four regions have a smaller proportion of their population of working age, but the proportion of that group who have access to income support is much larger. To some extent this is by no means surprising, given that the groups that are relatively absent – the younger adults – are also the groups less likely to need some form of income support. Nevertheless the contrast is very sharp. In contrast to Melbourne, where some 31.3 percent of the working age population draw on income support, the figure reaches 45.5 percent in Latrobe City, 42.7 percent in Bendigo, 41.5 percent in Colac and 39.4 percent in Horsham. In all four regional areas, but particularly in Latrobe City, the divergence from Melbourne is most marked for those on disability support pensions and parenting payment (single) – the two groups most heavily implicated in the recent Welfare to Work Package. This starts to raise important questions about the effects of the Federal Government measures. These presume a ready availability of jobs for the groups who are being subject to a new work test, but the areas in which such groups are most heavily concentrated are also the areas with the least employment opportunities.

### 4.1.4 Working families

Data on *family type and labour force characteristics* (Table 10) help to throw some further light on the issue of an employment shortfall and the implications for work and family balance. In the discussion above on family composition the four regional areas have around the same proportion of families that are couple families with children under 15 as does Melbourne but there is a higher proportion of single-parent families with children under 15. For couple families with children the differences in labour market participation in comparison with Melbourne are not dramatic. As could be expected from the data on individual employment, there is less likelihood of both parents being employed full-time in Latrobe City and Bendigo and a greater likelihood in all four regional areas that one

parent is employed full-time and the other is employed part-time. This latter arrangement is the most common arrangement in all four regional areas (and in Melbourne as well). On the other hand an arrangement with one parent full-time and the other not employed – an arrangement that is sometimes called 'traditional' (Buchanan and Thornthwaite, 2001) – is a minority affair, comprising less than one-quarter of all couple families with children in Melbourne and in all four regional areas. In short, both parents are employed and must grapple with issues of work and family balance, as do many couple families with children in Melbourne and in all four regional areas.

Differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas are more evident for single parent families. The likelihood of a parent being unemployed is slightly higher in the four regional areas than in Melbourne (much higher in Latrobe City). Conversely the likelihood of this parent being employed full-time is significantly less in all four regional areas. This suggests particular barriers to participation in employment for single parents.

As noted above, we can observe a relative shortfall in employment opportunities (though more marked for some areas than others), a greater proportion of the working age population that draws on income support, a relative absence of tertiary-educated members of the community in all four regional areas, and a relative absence of professionals in employment. These factors help to explain the profile for the four regional areas of markedly lower weekly *family incomes* (Figure 2). The major difference with Melbourne is the relative absence of families earning very high incomes, though there is also a discrepancy at the bottom end of the income scale, with higher proportions of families in the four regional areas receiving low incomes.

## 4.2

### Implications for work and family balance

What do these data suggest for work and family balance? The socio-demographic data suggest that all four regional areas are experiencing population drift, affecting young adults in particular. This is seen as an important work and family issue, which raises important questions about the level and structure of labour demand in the area, the availability of infrastructure such as training and education facilities, and the quality of work experiences for young people. The socio-demographic data also indicate that caring responsibilities are likely to loom just as large for families in the regional areas as in Melbourne. Indeed the presence of a larger proportion of sole parents indicates that the challenge of caring for children may be particularly strong, while the larger proportion of post-retirement age groups in three of the regional areas suggests that elder care may be assuming greater importance. Thus the data point to substantial needs for supportive infrastructure of childcare and elder care as well as family-friendly practices at the workplace to help workers juggle paid work and caring.

It seems clear that rural and regional areas are subject to most of the familiar pressures that are pushing the issue of work and family balance to the fore everywhere, for example, changes in the size and composition of the paid workforce, marked particularly by the increased participation of women with dependent children, in concert with changes both in the structure of families and in the nature and distribution of caring responsibilities within the family. Feedback from the consultations and focus groups undertaken as part of this Project suggests that work and family balance is indeed a growing issue in regional areas, as elsewhere in Australia.

The need for good work and family balance is broadly similar in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas (though with some distinct problems in regional areas linked to population drift of young adults). The major difference with metropolitan areas concerns the stronger impediments to achieving a good work and family balance in regional areas. Otherwise put, it concerns the greater vulnerability to work and family imbalances in the regional areas. This can be discussed in terms of all three forces identified earlier:

- > The level and structure of labour demand;
- > The availability of public and private infrastructure; and
- > Specific employment benefits and workplace conditions.

As noted above, the statistical data point first to a weaker *level of labour demand* (particularly evident in Latrobe City and Bendigo, but more muted in Colac and Horsham). We identify in particular a shortfall in full-time opportunities, for men in two areas and for women in all four areas. Most of the data are based on a static snapshot from 2001. Other data and evidence from the consultations indicate that job growth has picked up after 2001, lifting job prospects in all areas and improving the relative position of Latrobe City and Bendigo. However, a shortfall in full-time job opportunities in comparison with the metropolitan area seems to remain. Our consultations with stakeholders and focus groups with employees in the four regional areas pointed to job growth over the past few years but to continuing worries about the weak level of labour demand, in particular for less-skilled workers.

A weak level of labour demand is an important issue in its own right, with numerous consequences for the local economy and working families. In addition, it is important because of its indirect effect on work and family balance. It makes it harder for families to succeed in choosing the mix of jobs that they might prefer (and the mix of distribution of caring responsibilities). A shortfall in job opportunities may mean constant scrambling by one or both partners in a couple household in order to find a suitable arrangement. A shortfall in full-time job opportunities makes it harder for families to choose to take up two full-time jobs. When it is not the product of a free choice, the decision to have only one earner in the family – or indeed no earner at all – can be disastrous for work and family balance. Weak levels of labour demand can foster a series of forced choices that are bad for work and family balance, for example, in single earner or low income households it can create pressures to work longer hours or to take up a second job.

For women in couple households the shortfall in full-time job opportunities means that the limited opportunities for part-time work loom relatively larger and become more significant as a source of additional income. Now part-time work is of course potentially family-friendly. It can offer a 'bridge' allowing women to enter or re-enter paid employment or maintain continuous participation and also facilitates men taking on caring responsibilities (Fagan and O'Reilly 1998, 8). However much part-time work in Australia is poor quality work, particularly that in the hospitality, retail and health and community services sector industries, typically associated with short hours, irregular schedules, casual status and little access to family friendly benefits, such as carer's leave. (Charlesworth et al 2002: 84)

## 4.2

### Implications for work and family balance

Thus adding a part-time job to a full-time job is not necessarily easy. Available regional area data do not allow us to analyse the number of hours worked by those employed part-time or the employment status of those jobs. However the importance of retail and health and community services industry employment for women in the four regional areas as well as feedback from the employee focus groups suggests that the hours may not be sufficient and the taking up of a particular part-time job may appear as a forced choice, to be considered a form of underemployment. Many of the consultations also pointed to this particular problem of underemployment and its link with work and family imbalance. At the same time, the general conditions of part-time work can also be inadequate and family unfriendly, with variable schedules and unpredictable changes in hours and a mismatch with the working hours of partners as well as with available childcare and other arrangements.

We also refer to a narrower *structure of labour demand*. This encompasses factors such a narrower range of industries and businesses and a narrower base of skill requirements. This issue seems common to the four regional areas. Our consultations and focus groups drew out some of the implications. They pointed in particular to problems in youth labour markets, which seemed to offer few apprenticeships and few full-time job opportunities, with young people increasingly confined to part-time casualised jobs. The narrow structure of labour demand clearly contributes to the problem of population drift, as young adults leave to seek better opportunities. But it is also a problem for those who remain. It means fewer opportunities to move jobs and fewer opportunities for career advancement. This is true for both skilled and less skilled workers, and it can foster high levels of dependence on the good will of the current employer. This goodwill may be understood as a willingness not to vary hours and schedules or it may be understood as a willingness to offer extra hours of overtime.

The data do not lead to conclusions about skill shortages. This was raised as an issue in most of the consultations, though it may have more effect on employers than on the skilled workers already employed. Solving skill shortages in the medium term requires a greater effort around education and training, and it is a difficult issue to solve in the short term. Skill shortages can indeed be more severe and harder to solve in regional areas, because of the relative absence of skilled labour and the narrower options for employers seeking to resolve shortages.

*Infrastructure*, such as childcare, transport and education and training, plays an important role in supporting (or frustrating) work and family balance. In general, infrastructure provision seems weaker in non-metropolitan areas. The private market for infrastructure services is weaker because of the lower family incomes and the higher costs of service provision and, as a result, regional areas are more reliant on public provision of infrastructure. But public provision must also wrestle with

difficulties of limited funds and high costs. Volunteering fills the gap in some cases, especially for health services and services such as fire protection and ambulance services, but it is itself increasingly under pressure in all four regional areas. The data do not allow confident judgments, but they do provide some indications of the state of infrastructure provision in the four areas. We allude to the way in which population drift is linked to a lack of education and training facilities for young people. It was noteworthy that most consultations expressed concern about access to post-school education and training, both for more skilled and less skilled groups, including women returning to work after a period out of the labour force due to childcare responsibilities. The lack of facilities (or their scattered location) can inhibit access and frustrate job opportunities. Extensive evidence from the consultations and focus groups related to childcare, with problems of lack of provision, as well as affordability and quality emerging in all areas. Transport was also a major issue, because of the distances that workers must travel to access suitable jobs. In consultations and focus groups many mentioned the need for public transport and the effect of high petrol prices in inhibiting access to jobs, especially second jobs in family. If there is only one car and if the potential job is part-time, it can appear impossible (or uneconomical) to take up the job.

The data are largely silent on *workplace conditions and benefits*. But they do provide some hints. Employees in the focus groups proved quick to identify both family-friendly practices and family-unfriendly practices. We do not know much about full-time jobs. Long hours based on overtime are often seen as family unfriendly, and this may be exacerbated when they take place within the framework of shiftwork, as is true of work in the health services in most regional areas or in the power generation plants and paper mills of the Latrobe Valley. However, our consultations and focus groups stressed that short hours can also cause difficulties for work and family balance. Many part-time jobs are located in retail and the health and community services industries, and often under casual conditions, leading to questions about the quality of the jobs and their ability to contribute to a good work and family balance. The dominance of youth labour markets by part-time casual jobs would seem to be a particular issue in some areas. Problems here can include employment insecurity, lack of access to training and career advancement, variable hours and schedules and underemployment.

The weaker level and structure of labour demand in the four regional areas makes workers more dependent. With full-time jobs scarce, families are more dependent on existing full-time and part-time jobs. This in turn means that individuals and families are more vulnerable to changes. The consultations and focus groups threw up considerable uncertainty and disquiet about the changes initiated by WorkChoices and the Welfare to Work Package. At the time of the research the changes were only recent. And perhaps because of a lack of reliable information about the precise detail of the changes, most respondents seemed uncertain about predicting the precise impact. However there was a

# 4.3

## Differences between the Four Regional Areas

widespread recognition that regional areas were more vulnerable to these changes because of the structure of the labour force and the labour markets. The Welfare to Work package was widely seen as an added pressure on single parents, offering few benefits given the difficulty of accessing good quality jobs and good quality childcare.

Some people felt that the impact of the WorkChoices initiatives would be muted for many workers because of the prominence of skill shortages. One participant in the consultations suggested the changes would lead to more jobs and greater prosperity in the future. But far more widespread was a feeling of foreboding about the likely impact of the changes (though with uncertainty about how many people would be affected). Numerous general concerns were raised, often focused either on possible loss of income or possible loss of current working-time arrangements. It was felt that any loss of penalty payments for overtime or work during non-social hours could have extremely poor consequences, including loss of crucial income and a resulting need to take a second job or perhaps work even longer hours in a full-time job. It was felt that if casual work or weekend work became more common this would inevitably impair work and family balance. In families with one car, the spread of working hours into the weekend would threaten the possibility of children's participation in sport, shopping, and time for visiting friends and relatives. Similarly, any spread of long hours and casualised conditions was seen as threatening access to good quality childcare. It was widely agreed that the changes threatened added stresses on work and family balance, especially for those less skilled and more reliant on casual or poorly paid jobs. It threatened to increasingly make family life 'second' to work. Particular concern was raised about the impact on already-highly casualised youth labour markets and whether this could accelerate the drift of young people away from regional areas.

One issue raised in all regional areas concerned volunteering, which was seen as essential in providing services and in adding to the quality of community life in regional areas. Indeed many respondents were insistent that the juggle for working families in regional areas is not just between work and family but between work, family and community. The Federal Government changes were seen as adding to the existing pressures that were discouraging volunteering and choking off the entry of new younger volunteers. Thus the predictable schedule needed for volunteering activities was threatened by any changes at work that led to longer and/or more unpredictable hours, while the pool of applicants could be limited if people were subjected to added stresses in job seeking and compulsory volunteering.

We have already identified some differences amongst the four regional areas. In this section we summarise in a series of points what we know from the data and from the consultations and focus groups in each area. The focus here is on what the stakeholders and employees identified as specific factors that had a direct or indirect impact on work and family balance in their local area.

### 4.3.1 Bendigo

Population drift was cited as a *background issue* that affected working families.

The data point to a weak *level of labour demand* (with a shortfall in full-time jobs for men and women). Those consulted felt that the city population was growing and employment growth was picking up as a result of new ventures (eg mining). However, there remained problems – a lack of jobs for low skilled workers and/or young people on the one hand and substantial skill shortages on the other hand. In addition, there was general concern about the long-term effects of lack of water and water management and about the continuing impact of business closures and relocations.

In regard to the *narrow structure of labour demand*, there was concern about the low skill base and the impact of low wages. Mention was made of the difficulties in attracting and retaining young professionals and the lack of qualified tradespeople.

*Weak infrastructure provision* did not appear quite as prominent a problem as in other areas. It was argued that childcare was becoming more available, although there were concerns about its commercialisation and quality. The city has education and training facilities, including a new technical college. Frequent mention was made of *workplace conditions*. This included the trend to long hours in retail and local government, lack of apprenticeships and apprentice conditions.

*General concerns* included the pressures on volunteering (it was felt that it was hard to maintain when juggling work and family) and the impact of the Welfare to Work Package on single parents. A particular concern, with high potential for disrupting work and family balance, was gambling.

### 4.3.2 Colac

Population drift and the implications of an ageing population were cited as *background issues* that shaped the experience of work and family balance. An increasing need for elder care was identified.

The data point to a relatively strong *level of labour demand* (though with some shortfall in full-time jobs for women). Those consulted felt that the area was doing

# 4.3

## Differences between the Four Regional Areas

well, but there remained a lack of full-time jobs for young and older workers. In regard to the *narrow structure of labour demand*, those consulted were conscious of pressures on low-skilled workers.

*Weak infrastructure provision* was also identified as a problem. The affordability and availability of childcare was another issue, with lack of public transport and high petrol prices also mentioned. But most stress was placed on the lack of education and training facilities, which was seen as having wide and long-term effects, for example the lack of a 'learning culture'. No local university and TAFE campus exists locally and undertaking post school education requires travel. Other forms of infrastructure such as housing, health services and youth-oriented services were also seen as inadequate.

### 4.3.3 Horsham

Population drift and the implications of an ageing population were cited by many of those consulted as *background issues* which affected working families.

The data point to a relatively strong *level of labour demand*. However, those consulted pointed to the lack of jobs for older people and for unskilled people. In addition there were concerns about the fate of agricultural industries in the broader region – especially traditional industries such as grain growing and sheep farming. In addition there were concerns about the medium-term impact of drought, lack of water, water management. In regard to the *narrow structure of labour demand*, significant concern was also expressed about the narrow skill base and the lack of access to opportunities for skill development.

There was widespread concern about *weak infrastructure provision*. This included childcare. In spite of the presence of a local university and TAFE campus, it was felt that training and education infrastructure remained insufficient. High petrol prices and a lack of public transport were also identified as problems.

*General concerns* included the impact of the industrial relations changes (for example in increasing the extent of casualisation, lower wages and shorter hours) and the consequent pressures on volunteering.

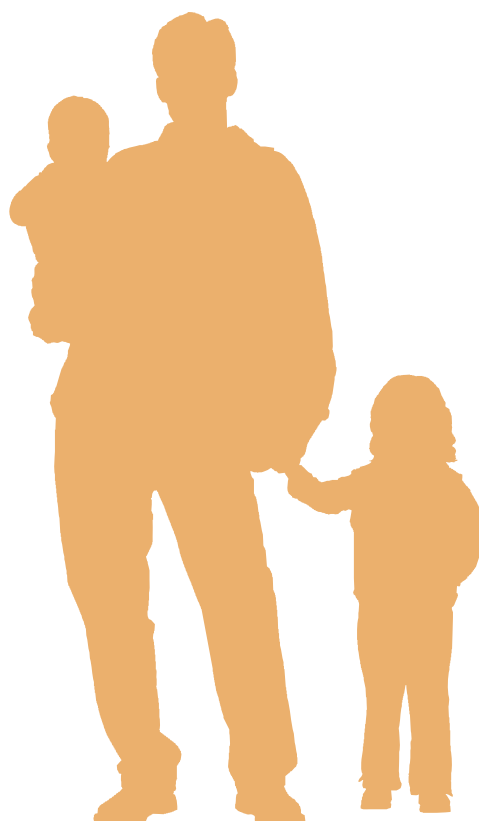
### 4.3.4 Latrobe City

Population drift and the implications of an ageing population were cited as *background issues*.

The data point to a weak *level of labour demand* (with a shortfall in full-time jobs for men and women). Those consulted felt that employment growth was picking up, but weak labour market conditions were still evident, especially for young people and/or those less qualified. A *narrow structure of labour demand* is a major feature. Though conditions were improving, the area was still wrestling with the impact of the closure of the SEC and it was still dependent on a small group of major employers.

*Weak infrastructure provision* was identified as a problem. It was felt that childcare centres are only in larger towns, and they tend to be expensive and with inflexible hours. Family day care places were seen as limited. Childcare was seen as a system under stress, limited not only by availability but also affordability. Transport was identified as a major problem, exacerbated by the spread of business and population across the four towns that constitute the city.

In connection with *workplace conditions*, respondents mentioned the predominance of shiftwork and the lack of opportunities for advancement. *General concerns* were again expressed over the lack of time for volunteering and the possible impact of Federal industrial relations changes.





# Options for Action

## 5.1

### Introduction

Governments at all levels play a critical role in setting the policy agenda around work and family balance in partnership with employers, unions and local communities (Charlesworth et al 2002: 59). In particular, State governments can and do play a significant role in encouraging and enabling workers, employers and families to better balance work and family responsibilities and enhance their capacity to participate in community life.

The Victorian Government's *Action Agenda for Work and Family Balance*, launched in 2003, sets out a whole of government approach to better work and family balance in Victoria, and identifies four main priorities for government action. These priorities are to:

- > Lead the way in work and family balance;
- > Support industry to adopt practices that enhance work and family balance;
- > Work with the community on work and family issues; and to
- > Demonstrate good work and family practice in Victorian public employment.

In 2005, an audit of the Action Agenda (the *Work and Family Balance Action Agenda Report Card*) highlighted several areas of achievement. In supporting industry to adopt practices that enhance work and family balance, these achievements included:

- > The Better Work and Family Balance Grants Program which has supported the introduction of flexible work arrangements in small business, non-government organisations and in local government;
- > The Quality Part-time Work Research Project and the development of Industry Guidelines; and
- > Industry Forums around work family balance, including at the Building Commission in partnership with the building and construction industry

In working with the community on work and family issues, the Victorian Government has also established:

- > The Premier's Children's Advisory Committee, which is advising on, among other things, how well services for children, including out of school hours care (OSHC) and maternal health services, are meeting working families' needs; and
- > 'One stop' shops for early childhood services, with priority given to communities experiencing disadvantage.

While a number of these initiatives have included supporting programs in rural and regional communities, (such as the Better Work and Family Balance Grant Project to encourage flexible work initiatives at Wights Hyundai, Traralgon), as with other governments both in Australia and overseas any focus on work and family balance has been largely 'metro-centric'. To a large extent this reflects the concentration of paid employment in metropolitan cities. In 2001 for example, 74.2 percent of wage and salary earners living in Victoria were located in the Melbourne statistical division (ABS 2002). However as highlighted in our data snapshots, many couple families with children and many single parent families with children in regional Victoria are engaged in paid employment. We also know from aggregate Australian data that many working families, including those in non metropolitan areas, have elder care responsibilities while others provide care for sick and disabled relatives (Campbell & Charlesworth 2004). Like those in Melbourne, working families in rural and regional areas are thus faced squarely with the challenge of balancing work and family. Indeed, the added responsibilities of community engagement through volunteering, even more critical in regional than in metropolitan communities, makes the work and family juggle a more complex one.

While we have uncovered 'islands' of good practice around flexible 'family-friendly' workplace arrangements and local infrastructure and support services, it became clear in the stakeholder consultations and at the community forums held as part of the Project, that more needs to be done in these communities.

## 5.1

### Introduction

In particular, there is a need to strategically consider ways to support workers with family responsibilities, to engage employers in changing practice and to systematically develop appropriate community services as essential work and family balance underpinnings.

We believe there is a case for increased support to working families in regional Victoria. This is particularly crucial at the current time, as in the four regional cites on which this Project focused, there were wide ranging concerns expressed that aspects of the recent federal WorkChoices legislation and the Welfare to Work Package will negatively impact on work and family balance.

The options for action outlined below highlight both more general issues and also canvass possible options for further development and implementation in each of the four regional areas. They draw on the consultative process that has underpinned this research Project. In the process of the stakeholder representative consultations, the employee focus groups and the regional forums in each of the four regional areas, participants were asked directly about government or local action that could be taken to assist working families better balance their work, family and community responsibilities. They were also asked to identify any good practice or good models currently in place, including within workplaces and within the local community, that currently support working families. Several of these are noted below.

The options for action the Victorian government, in collaboration with other levels of government, business, unions or community organisations, might usefully consider to improve work and family balance in regional Victoria are set out in four main areas:

- > Education and Information
- > Development and Promotion of Good Practice
- > Better Linkages to Support Local Infrastructure
- > Monitoring and Further Research.

## 5.2

### Education and Information

The stakeholder consultations, employee focus groups and regional forums all highlighted the need for a more targeted community education and information strategy to raise awareness and to stimulate informed discussion about better supporting working families in regional areas. A number of employers who attended the regional forums also expressed a keen interest in gaining access to examples of family-friendly practices.

A range of materials designed to both raise awareness of the challenges of work and family balance and to showcase 'good practice' family-friendly workplace arrangements is produced by the federal and Victorian governments. The Industrial Relations Victoria (IRV) website provides information about current Victorian Government work and family initiatives and activities, including innovative case studies generated as part of the Better Work and Family Grants program. The Victorian Government has also convened a number of industry forums, including industry round tables hosted by the Minister for Industrial Relations in 2005 on Quality Part-Time Work and in 2006 to discuss strategies and practical initiatives that could be used within the new industrial relations agenda.

Despite such promotion and information provision, we found a relatively low level of awareness about possible strategies and solutions to work and family imbalance and, in some instances, a fairly fatalistic approach to the challenges working families faced. While many participants in the employee focus groups felt it was difficult to find work that suited their families' needs, a number also appeared to accept they had had to 'make sacrifices' and put their work commitments before their families. Likewise the concept of 'work and family balance' did not immediately resonate for many of the stakeholders interviewed. However in the areas on which the Project focused, where incomes are low, childcare provision generally scarce and there is a pressure for all adult family members to undertake paid work, almost all interviewed expressed concern not only about the capacity of families to manage paid work and family responsibilities but also to contribute to vital community infrastructure through volunteering. There was also some confusion about the various roles and responsibilities of different levels of government in supporting working families with the work and family and community 'juggle'.

Three key areas for information and education were identified in the process of the research:

- > General community awareness raising of both the challenges of work and family balance as well as practical community, industry and workplace strategies to better support working families in this respect;
- > Targeted employer education and support; and
- > Targeted information for employees on their workplace rights in respect of work and family and family-friendly options that could be negotiated.

## 5.2.1 General community awareness raising

The need for increased community awareness and responsiveness to the challenges of work and family balance in the regional areas came through all of the consultative mechanisms used in the process of research. Greater awareness and better information about the issues was seen as important in generating practical community, industry and workplace strategies to better support working families.

Some participants in the employee focus groups stated they would like local, state and federal governments to make people more aware and to educate people and employers on the importance of and how to achieve better work and family balance. Several participants also said they would like the various governments to better educate people on how to access and navigate the various government services available to help working families. At the regional forums, material generated by IRV, the Workplace Rights Advocate and the Equal Opportunity Commission was distributed to participants in relation to good practice case studies of family-friendly workplace initiatives, industry guidelines, and employee rights in respect of work and family and also the new industrial relations system. Many participants indicated that while this material was potentially very valuable, they had previously little access to such information.

### Option 1 Raise Awareness of Work and Family Balance as a Community Issue

#### 1 Dissemination of available information

Local government offices and community health centres would provide useful points for community dissemination of printed material that is generated by IRV, the Workplace Rights Advocate and the Equal Opportunity Commission. Given that RDV officers are located in or just outside each of the four regional areas, they could provide a conduit for available information relevant to work and family for the local community. In the regional areas there are also whole of government networks of Victorian government officers from various agencies that could be used to disseminate state government material and other information and to act as conduits for issues raised.

#### 2 Promoting community awareness

Two mechanisms suggested at the regional forums to raise awareness of the challenges of work and family balance as a community issue were to place articles in local newspapers and convene local forums around

specific issues. In respect to local newspapers, it would be valuable for IRV and RDV to prepare brief articles for the local papers in each of the project areas summarising the issues raised in the pilot research. This would provide feedback to the local community and generate some greater awareness of the work and family issues faced by working families in the local area.

During the process of the consultation, a number of local government officers expressed interest in facilitating community forums. When action coming out of this research Project is initiated, a local forum could be held to provide and generate some specific community focus around these initiatives.

## 5.2.2 Targeted employer education and support

In the current industrial relations context, which provides little mandated protection of workers with family responsibilities, positive employer practice becomes even more critical in supporting or frustrating work and family balance for working families. The need for better information for employers around work and family balance and introducing family-friendly workplace arrangements was raised both by employees and employers.

Focus group participants felt the main thing local businesses or employers could do to better support people to achieve a good balance between work and family was to be more flexible. There needed to be *'give and take'* on the part of both employees and employers in order to *'make things work'* – *'It's got to work both ways.'* A few focus group participants also suggested that employers in their local area could be more open to initiatives such as job sharing, working from home and flexi-time.

The employers who were interviewed as part of the stakeholder consultations or who attended the regional forums also identified access to information about and good practice models of various family-friendly working time and leave arrangements as crucial, particularly in attracting skilled workers. Many were also interested in having access to better information on the business benefits of taking action. Further, there would appear to be relatively scant knowledge about the use of flexible working time arrangements in attracting and retaining skilled workers, as evidenced in The Regional Skills Shortage Surveys conducted by Employment Programs in Department for Victorian Communities. In Bendigo, for example, only 10 percent of employers surveyed indicated that they used flexible work arrangements to attract skilled employees (DVC 2006: 33).

# 5.2

## Education and Information

### Option 2 Develop an Employer Information Kit

One specific initiative suggested at both the Latrobe City and Horsham forums was an information/education kit aimed at small and medium sized employers highlighting the business benefits of family-friendly workplaces as well as practical low cost local examples of workplace flexibility.

There is a wide range of material that could be drawn on to produce such a kit, such as the *Best Practice Work and Family Life Manual* that was jointly developed by the Victorian Hospitals Industrial Association and the Australian Services Union (Victorian Authorities and Services Branch) through a Better Work and Family Balance Grant. Material would need to be customised for the specific regional city and include local good practice examples.

Such an information kit could be developed in the first instance in both Latrobe City and Horsham and then distributed more widely as a template to Colac, Bendigo and other Victorian regional areas, which could customise it to reflect local issues and innovation. Its development would need to be overseen by IRV but could be facilitated jointly by the RDV Business Development Officer and the relevant local government business manager in collaboration with local business groups as well as the local Trades and Labour Council.

### Option 3 Facilitate Employer Action to Promote Work & Family Balance

Three mechanisms suggested to facilitate the promotion of work and family balance strategies by employers were through industry forums, leadership programs run through local business networks and through the establishment of a Work and Family 'ambassadors' program.

#### 1 Industry Forums

In both Bendigo and Colac, there was employer interest in industry forums that could focus variously on different industries and occupations in the local area. For example, the CPA Australia group in Bendigo have expressed interest in being involved in a forum for members in Bendigo, and the Industry Development Officer of the City of Greater Bendigo offered to organise a forum on family-friendly work practices with the local HR Practitioners Group. Representatives from the local Manufacturing Group and Bendigo Bank also expressed interest in supporting industry forums.

#### 2 Leadership Forums and Programs

In Colac, interest was expressed in holding a 'leadership' forum in which the local network of business leaders could take part. There was some interest from local government in supporting such an initiative as there are already regular employer briefings/forums. In both areas, IRV and RDV could assist in helping locate suitable speakers and providing material, with RDV Business Development Officers acting as local facilitators.

In all of the regional areas local business networks have established leadership groups or networks. Many of these are supported by RDV. In Horsham, the leadership program group supports specific projects designed to develop potential business leaders in the local community. One proposal made in Horsham was that the leadership group could include within their program a project focussing specifically on developing family-friendly practices. It was suggested that such an initiative would also be supported by Business Horsham.

#### 3 Ambassadors Program

The main action suggested at the Latrobe City forum was to establish a local Work and Family Ambassadors Program to promote work and family balance strategies. Ambassadors would be employers and others who have implemented good practice. Those who nominated to be part of a working group to establish the program included representatives from VECCI, the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council, the Gippsland Area Consultative Committee, Gippsland Water and Latrobe City. Given the importance of the retail industry in Latrobe City it would also be valuable to involve the local SDA organiser.

It was suggested that the Work and Family Ambassadors program could provide information about good practice, local level initiatives and develop effective information advice strategies to support business and provide a focus for consultation with business on work and family balance issues in partnership with government, unions and local community organisations. Such an initiative is similar to those undertaken by employer action groups established in the UK.

#### 5.2.3 Targeted Information for employees

Both employees and various stakeholders supported targeted information for employees, as well as apprentices and those seeking work, about their rights and responsibilities in respect of work and family. During the employee focus groups and at two of the regional forums, the lack of knowledge, particularly by young people, about their rights at work was a cause for concern. This related not only to rights in respect of work and family but also about basic rights to a safe and discrimination free workplace under OH&S and anti discrimination legislation. There was also some confusion over rights relating to employees rather than subcontractors, with one representative

from the local Trades and Labour Council raising concern that young job seekers were being told that they had to establish themselves as self-employed contractors to secure casual labouring work. Another issue raised at the Bendigo forum was that employer requirements for a medical certificate when employees were ill were extremely difficult to meet given the severe shortage of doctors in the local area. Under the WorkChoices regulations, an employee can either obtain a medical certificate from a health practitioner registered or licensed under a law of a state or territory, including pharmacists and other alternative health practitioners, or can provide a statutory declaration if they are unable to make an appointment with their medical practitioner on a particular day. However this was not well known.

In most of the consultation throughout the Project, specific concern was expressed about the impact of WorkChoices on work, family and community balance. However there was some confusion about the roles of the federal and state government in respect to the recent changes and in the employee focus groups a number of participants said they would like to see the state government 'stand up' for working families in respect of WorkChoices.

#### **Option 4 Promote Employee Rights**

The awareness raising set out in Option 1 could also be directed towards specifically promoting knowledge of workers' rights under OH&S legislation, anti-discrimination law and within the new federal industrial relations framework. This would involve both the distribution of available material and specific local action. Distribution of material developed by IRV, JobWatch, the Workplace Rights Advocate and the Equal Opportunity Commission would raise awareness of the rights workers have to a reasonable accommodation of their work and family responsibilities, as well as provide information about avenues of complaint and redress. Given the confusion about which levels of government were responsible for the new industrial relations regime, distribution of current material generated by these Victorian Government bodies to regional areas would also help local communities better understand the current position of the Victorian Government in opposing the effect of the WorkChoices legislation.

The Latrobe City Trades and Labour Council expressed interest in working with the Gippsland Workers Rights Group to promote employee rights in the local area.

#### **Option 5 Develop an Employee Information Kit**

There was particular interest expressed at both the Bendigo and Latrobe City forums in developing an information kit aimed at employees, particularly young people. Such a kit would set out family-friendly options that could be negotiated and employee rights, responsibilities and available redress under any changes introduced under WorkChoices. It may also be possible to use specific examples of flexible working arrangements in regional areas that employees had successfully negotiated, either collectively or as individuals. In the employee focus group several participants reported that they had negotiated with their employers to have flexible working hours, which enabled them to work on days and at times that better suited their families and to work from home.

Such a kit could build on material produced by IRV, JobWatch, the Workplace Rights Advocate and the Equal Opportunity Commission and, like the employer kit set out in Option 3, could draw on the best practice clauses and provisions set out in the *Best Practice Work and Family Life Manual* developed in the community services industry

The employee information kit could be developed in the first instance in both Bendigo and Latrobe City and then distributed more widely as a template to Colac, Horsham and other Victorian regional areas, which could customise it to reflect local issues and innovation. Its development would need to be oversighted by IRV but could be facilitated jointly by the relevant RDV Community Development Officer in collaboration with local community support groups as well as the local Trades and Labour Council.

# 5.3

## Development and Promotion of Good Practice Models

Given the current industrial relations context, what happens at the workplace level is going to be crucial in supporting or frustrating the work and family balance of working families (Pocock and Charlesworth 2006: 7). As our analysis in the four regional areas suggests, the structure of job opportunities, the availability of public and private infrastructure such as transport and childcare, and the demands of community involvement mean working families in regional Victoria will be particularly dependent on 'good' employers and 'good practice' around work and family. Thus there is a strong case for individual employer action, in partnership with others including governments, to develop good practice around working time and leave arrangements in the workplace so that working families can be supported in finding a balance between work and the rest of their lives, including their caring and community responsibilities.

As in metropolitan areas, better work and family balance in regional Victoria is crucial in meeting the demands of economic, social, community and family relationships, and it requires a partnership approach to flexible working time and work and family balance (Fagan et al 2006). State governments have a major role to play in brokering and supporting innovation around work and family balance (Charlesworth et al 2002: 87; Pocock and Charlesworth 2006: 7). In Victoria, as highlighted above, the Better Work and Family Balance Grants program has provided funding to small businesses, local government and non-government organisations to investigate, in partnership with the relevant unions, employee work and family needs, to implement policies and programs to assist employee work and family balance while improving business performance, and the development of model clauses and agreements.

In the current IR context such positive partnerships become even more vital, both in promoting existing local good practice and in supporting innovation through employer, union and business partnerships facilitated by government. International experience suggests that social partnerships such as these can lead to joint problem-solving and joint solutions between government, employers, employer associations, unions and local communities (Fagan et al 2006: 15).

### Option 6 Promote Existing Local Good Practice Models

In the consultation undertaken as part of this Project, a number of good work and family practices and employers were identified. These included a diverse range of workplaces, ranging from a retail communications outlet in Horsham, a retail hardware outlet in Colac, manufacturing and pharmaceutical businesses in Bendigo, as well as public sector employers and local government in Latrobe City. IRV together with the RDV Business Development Officers in each regional city could work with several of these

businesses to produce a one-page case study of the particular good practice or workplace featured. This could be undertaken in consultation with the relevant union or the Trades and Labour Council and the relevant employer association to ensure that the practice or workplace featured was recognised positively both by employers and employees.

Such case studies could provide the material used in media outlets for community awareness raising as highlighted in Option 2 and the Employer and Employee Information Kits outlined in Options 2 and 5.

### Option 7 Support Innovation: Partnership Projects

While several potential areas for innovative pilot Projects were raised throughout the Project, two were seen as particularly innovative: one focused on a specific business and the other on an industry.

#### 1. Mutually agreed rostering

In one of the regional cities, there was some interest expressed by a timber processing business in building on the company's informal rostering practices. A number of employees have community obligations, for example, through membership of the Country Fire Authority or through involvement in local sporting clubs. Currently the company permits employees to attend to their voluntary duties and community involvements where possible while meeting the staffing requirements of the business. Undertaking an employee work and family/community needs survey to identify the current requirements of employees with a view to implementing a more formal system of mutually agreed rostering arrangements would be a positive process which could be replicated at other worksites. For positive outcomes, such an approach would need to be undertaken in partnership with the relevant union.

#### 2. Introducing Employee Choice Rostering in Retail SMEs

At the 2006 Industrial Relations Round Table hosted by the Minister for Industrial Relations, a number of retail industry representatives expressed interest in participating in a pilot Project in a large regional city to assist small and medium sized businesses in the retail industry to introduce family-friendly hours scheduling through employee choice rostering. As we noted in an earlier report to the Victorian government (Charlesworth et al 2002: 89), employee choice rostering schemes provide for employees to choose their own working time arrangements within the constraints of the business. This provides many employees with a greater capacity to balance their work and family lives. Employee choice rostering has advantages for employers as well as employees. Apart from high levels of staff morale and productivity, firms can better align staff levels to production requirements (Buchanan and Thornthwaite, 2001, 59).

# 5.4

## Better Government, Community and Industry Linkages

Similar industry-wide employee choice rostering initiatives have been undertaken both in the aged care industry in NSW, via a partnership of employers, unions and aged services representatives facilitated by the former NSW Department for Women, and in the Victorian Licensed Club industry. In this latter Project IRV funded a partnership project between Licensed Clubs Victoria and the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union to produce industry guidelines for setting up a flexible employee choice rostering system. A pilot group of five metropolitan, outer metropolitan and regional licensed clubs were involved in investigation of flexible rostering arrangements, which identified both the impediments and the potential for employee choice rostering solutions. The process followed in both these projects provides a useful template for the proposed partnership project in the retail industry and the resulting case study would provide impetus for other retail businesses to trial employee choice rostering.

Representatives of retail employers together with the relevant union have expressed interest in participating in such a project. Given the importance of the retail industry to both female and male employment in Bendigo, it would appear that this should be the regional area in which the project is located. The involvement of the Greater Bendigo City Council's Industry Development Officer and the RDV Business Development Officer would help facilitate the recruitment of retail businesses to participate in the partnership project.

As we noted in our earlier report, workers, those seeking paid work, families and employers all depend on the communities in which they live, work and operate (Charlesworth et al 2002: 95). Yet for many, the capacity to participate in the community is constrained to a large extent by the lack of work and family balance (Pocock et al, 2001). Changes in the operating hours of paid work are increasingly mismatched with school hours, childcare, public transport, and other services. The opening hours of many public and private services, from health and community services to post offices and banks, are still scheduled around standard working hours and the breadwinner model of the family, with its assumption of a full-time homemaker who is always available to undertake the business of 'family support' during working hours. In the regional areas we studied, this separation of the spheres of work and community is more than just an issue of time scheduling. While government and community infrastructure provides support for volunteer activities, such as the Country Fire Authority and the local ambulance service, or for school buses to take children to and from school, there is sometimes scant recognition of the needs of employees and businesses. Working realities and preferences and choices for work and family balance need to be integrated and reflected in better government, community and industry linkages.

### 5.4.1 Innovative and responsive infrastructure

Many of the stakeholders and focus group participants emphasised the need for improved and integrated infrastructure and services to regional areas. Two key areas are transport and childcare. While we found evidence of whole of government collaboration around a number of initiatives such as the use of school buses for community transport, to date there has been little focus on directly linking the spheres of paid work, family responsibilities and community engagement in such initiatives.

#### Option 8 Promote Responsive Family Day Care

Access to good quality childcare was an issue raised throughout the consultation process. One of the key issues was in gaining access to hours of work that met available childcare or finding childcare that could be flexible enough to meet demands for out-of-standard-hours care. Focus group participants in particular wanted greater access to quality and affordable childcare and childcare which catered more for people working early mornings, afternoons and/or nights. While it has a limited number of carers, the Family Day

## Better Government, Community and Industry Linkages

Care (FDC) service in Colac is a flexible and responsive service which provides childcare through its carer network in the evenings and on weekends to meet the needs of those who work 'unsocial hours'. Carers who can meet a range of time schedules are specifically recruited for the service.

Together with the RDV Community Development and Business Development Officers, the FDC service could be encouraged to document the service it provides and the principles on which it operates as a good practice model for other regional communities.

### Option 9 Investigate Employee Use of Community Transport

The issue of transport, especially for those who did not have access to a vehicle or to the funds to pay for petrol and upkeep of a car was seen by the vast majority of those with whom we consulted as shaping both access to employment and the maintenance of ongoing employment. In both Horsham and Latrobe City, the Victorian departments of Infrastructure, Human Services, Education and Training and Victorian Communities have been working with local community groups on 'Transport Connections' pilot projects. The key objective of the Transport Connection Program is to improve access and mobility for people in rural and regional Victoria (see DHS 2005) by:

- > Making better use of existing transport resources through new and coordinated approaches;
- > Facilitating dialogue between the community, transport providers and local businesses to develop tailored transport solutions; and
- > Strengthening links between the community and public transport sectors.

The pilot project in Horsham has focused to date on making better use of the school bus to meet the transport needs of the local community, while the pilot project in the Latrobe Valley has focused on youth transport and has worked closely with Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network to develop an action plan focussing on providing more flexible transport options for students attending TAFE (DHS 2005: 14).

To date, there has not been any assessment in either project of the feasibility of better meeting employee needs for transport. In Horsham, one area where this could occur would be in consultation with employers and employees on the new industrial estate on the outskirts of the city. In Latrobe City, a critical issue for many employees is being able to travel to work between the four towns that constitute the City.

While there are some regulatory and service limits to a more extensive use of school buses outside school hours, it would be valuable to investigate the feasibility of using

community buses to better meet the needs of employees for transport to and from work, in collaboration with the local community and the businesses that are located within the catchment area.

### 5.4.2 Developing responsive services

The local community context in which businesses operate and employees work is a major influence on work and family balance. In recognition of the importance of the local context a number of community-based initiatives in Italy and more recently in the UK, known as 'times in the city' projects, have focused on the reorganisation of working hours together with changes in the operating hours of services such as kindergartens, public transport and local government. In consultation with local government representatives in the course of the Project it became clear that given the focus and the level of demand on local government services and their employees in the regional areas, it was sometimes difficult for local government employees to manage their own work, family and community balance.

In Bristol City Council in the UK a 'times in the city' project was undertaken that explored the potential for innovative working patterns that would improve both the quality of Council services and employees' ability to balance their paid work with family and personal lives (Fagan et al 2006: 65). A key objective was to develop a partnership between the relevant trade unions and the Council to enable them to jointly identify better ways to organise work and time and to create a positive model of flexibility that benefited employees, employers and customers. As described by Fagan et al (2006: 65) a number of successful pilot projects involving specific services has resulted in more innovative working practices. For example, in the library service, flexible working hours were introduced to meet employee preferences, while meeting the public's request for extended opening hours. In extending the services provided by Health and Environmental Services, customer needs were met while new staffing and working arrangements using compressed hours and working from home reportedly gave staff more choice in working hours, with an added benefit of avoiding the rush hour traffic congestion.

### Option 10 Investigate More Responsive Local Government Services

Building on the 'times in the city' approach in the Bristol City Council, union and employer partnerships could be established in the larger regional areas such as the City of Greater Bendigo and Latrobe City to investigate the potential and feasibility of innovative working time and leave arrangements that would both improve local government employees' ability to balance their work and family and community lives and better meet the demands for local government services by the community, including those who require services out of the standard hours.

# 5.5

## Monitoring and Research

The Work and Family Balance in Regional Victoria Project is a pilot project. As we have noted in the Introduction, the data analysis and regional consultation undertaken for the Project have enabled us to identify some key work and family issues in the four regional areas which we hope will enrich discussion, debate and action around these issues in those areas. However the pilot nature of the Project limits any in-depth exploration of employer strategies in specific industries and workplaces or of the workplace conditions and benefits relevant to work, family and community balance in regional Victoria. Moreover the timing of the research during a period in which significant changes in workplace conditions and benefits have been introduced, particularly for working families in the more vulnerable labour markets in many regional areas, has limited any comprehensive assessment of the impact of these regulatory changes on work and family balance. Yet a better understanding of the impact of such changes is vital, if state and local governments and indeed businesses are going to ameliorate the risks not only for individual workers and working families, but also for local communities.

### Option 11 Build on the Pilot Project

Ongoing monitoring and research not only provides government with a basis for strategic and appropriate policy responses but also provides the information necessary for local government, local communities and employers to take action within the community on work and family issues. To this end several options for further research and monitoring of the industrial relations changes in regional Victoria are outlined below.

#### 1 The Four Regional Areas One Year on

In providing data on relevant industry, employment and socio-demographic characteristics, we have relied in the main on 2001 ABS Census data. This has limited our capacity to provide a current snapshot for each of the regional areas and the region in which they are located. The 2006 ABS census results are to be made available from May 2007. The 2006 data could be analysed following the template developed in the current projects to provide a more up-to-date picture of the structure of local employment and socio-demographic characteristics that impact on work and family balance in the four regional areas that formed part of this Project. An analysis of the changes between the 2001 and 2006 data would enable the identification of pertinent trends.

This updating could also be accompanied by a follow up of the stakeholder and employee consultations to see what, if any, changes have occurred, particularly in respect of changes in employment benefits and conditions following the implementation of WorkChoices. The compounding effect of the Welfare to Work Package would also be able to be more clearly identified.

### 2 Inclusive Government Policy and Research on Work and Family Balance

As noted above, this research Project has highlighted the metro-centric nature of much government activity, including policy, information and research around work and family. We suggest that in the further development of policy and in the undertaking of research related to work and family, such as in any further State of Victoria surveys, that a regional focus is included. Such a focus should include an explicit recognition of the demands of work and family and community balance, as well the impact of underemployment, long hours and the scheduling of hours on work and family community balance.

### Option 12 Monitor Industrial Relations Changes in Regional Areas

The pilot Project has highlighted several areas of potential vulnerability in respect to the federal industrial relations changes. In order to explore these areas in more depth some wide-ranging case study research is necessary. We suggest three discrete research projects to explore issues that have emerged directly in the course of this Project.

#### 1 The impact of underemployment on work and family balance in regional Victoria

This Project has identified underemployment as a work and family issue in the regional areas studied both via consultations with employees and stakeholders and also in the evidence of the dominance of part-time work in particular industries, such as retail and health and community services. The impact of underemployment on work and family and community balance needs to be better understood, particularly in the context of the impact that WorkChoices and the work requirements of the Welfare to Work Package may have in particular industries, such as the health and community services industry, and on particular groups, such as those with a disability and single parents.

# 5.5

## Monitoring and Research

### 2 Monitoring changes in working hours arrangements

The Fair Pay and Conditions Standard introduced by WorkChoices entails provision for the averaging of maximum ordinary time hours over a year and the potential for the extension of the span of ordinary hours and for the supply of reasonable overtime. At the same time it offers an opportunity for the removal of penalty rates for overtime and unsocial hours worked. Two avenues of research worth pursuing are:

- > Monitoring the averaging of hours in an industry that may be vulnerable to such changes such as tourism within a specific regional context. Both Colac and Bendigo have significant tourism employment and would provide useful case study locations for such research; and
- > Payment of overtime hours worked in a specific industry in a specific area such as in energy companies or in timber operations in Latrobe City or Colac.

### 3 Monitoring the buying out of annual leave

For those employees with an entitlement to annual leave, WorkChoices makes it possible for them to trade off two weeks of their regular four weeks entitlement (see Appendix 1). Employees may request to cash out up to two weeks of their credited annual leave entitlement every 12 months (or the pro-rata equivalent for part-time employees). While an employer must not require an employee to cash out an entitlement to annual leave, or exert undue influence or undue pressure on an employee to do so, there may well be situations where an employee feels obliged to do so.

Any reduction of annual leave not only has obvious OH&S implications, but also makes it extremely difficult for working families to provide care for school aged children during school holidays and/or to take holidays together as a family. In regional areas, any reduction in annual leave, voluntary or not, impacts directly on tourism. Further, for those within regional areas whose leave is reduced, it makes it much harder to participate in the vital volunteering that many employees and stakeholders argue is the 'life blood' of small regional communities.

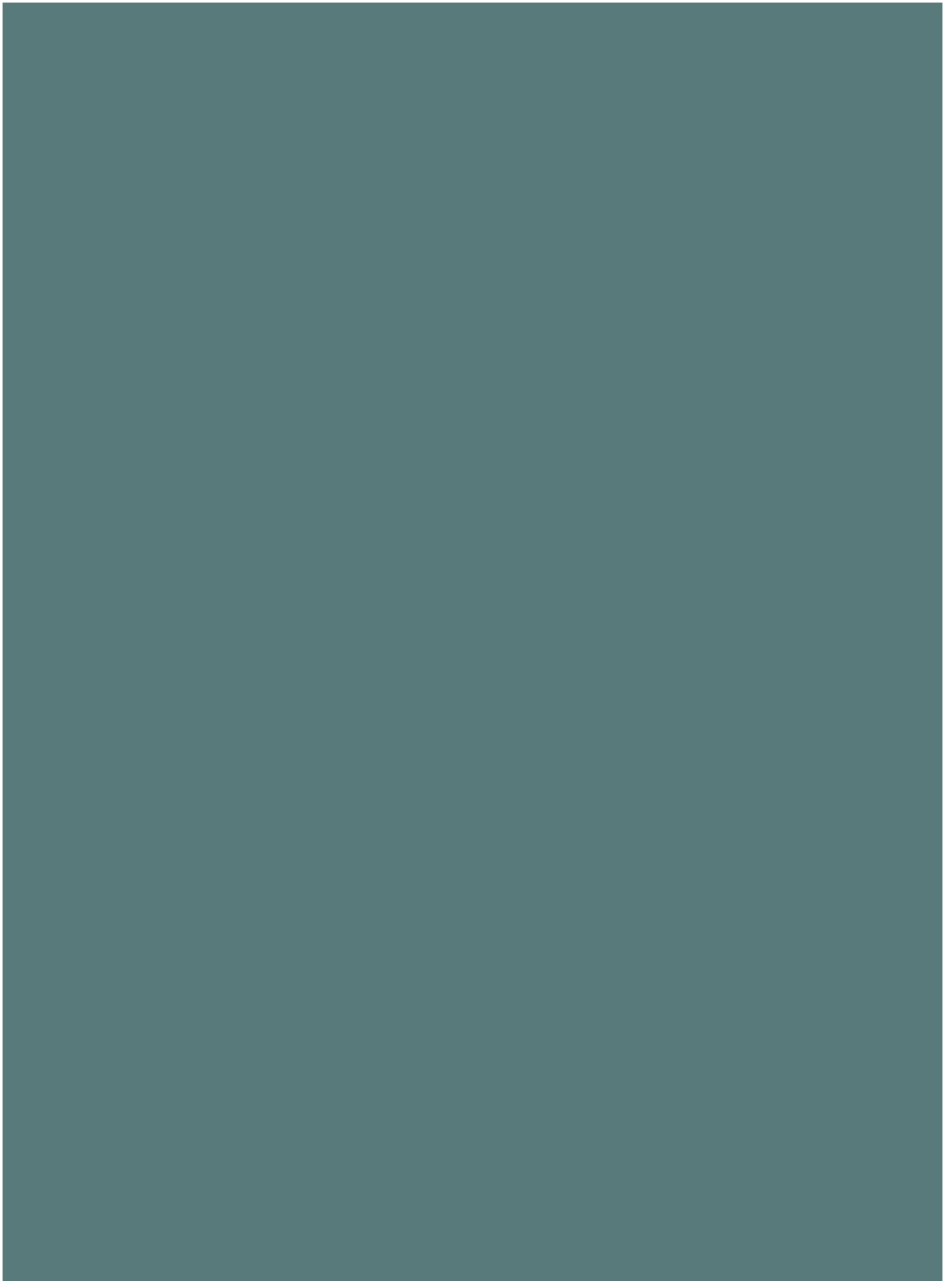
It will be important to monitor the extent to which annual leave is traded off or 'bought out' and any consequent impact for work and family balance that this has in a specific city and/or industry context.



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## For further Information

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## Industrial Relations Victoria

Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development

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