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Mitigation strategies to manage the impact of the fuel crisis on child and family services in Victoria

Drawing on almost 100 responses from child and family service providers in Victoria, this paper synthesises mitigation strategies organisations are implementing in response to the fuel crisis.

Sector impact

The fuel crisis is compounding broader cost-of-living pressures to create a complex set of challenges for services, families, and staff. Agencies report:

- Rising operational costs, particularly for fleet fuel and outreach-based programs
- Increased demand for emergency relief, including fuel vouchers, food aid, and taxi vouchers
- Reduced client capacity to attend essential services and escalating need for support
- Staff wellbeing and retention risks due to financial pressure
- Heightened strain in regional and rural areas where travel is unavoidable

In response, organisations are deploying mitigation strategies to maintain service continuity while minimising additional burden on families and workers.

Sector mitigation strategies

Travel reduction and efficiency measures

Carpooling and grouped travel

Many agencies, especially regional providers, are carpooling between office sites, grouping client visits geographically, and limiting solo travel where possible. This reduces fuel use while maintaining in person service where essential.

Consolidation and prioritisation of outreach

Services are mapping client locations to create more efficient outreach routes, reducing duplicated travel and ensuring each trip achieves multiple service goals.

Reduced non-essential travel

Internal meetings, inter-office travel, and some appointments are being shifted to virtual formats, freeing up fuel for priority in-person support.

Alternative transport options

Agencies are encouraging staff to use public transport where possible. Some agencies are

reporting that staff are riding their bikes to alleviate personal costs.

Flexible work arrangements

Increased work from home (WFH)

Many agencies are enabling or expanding WFH arrangements where possible – a key ask from the workforce, across the sector. Some staff in larger agencies are working out of their nearest office to minimise long-distance travel.

Hybrid models for outreach staff

Though frontline outreach cannot be fully remote, some organisations are considering:

- Office based days when multiple online/phone appointments are scheduled
- Flexible start/finish times to align with public transport availability
- Reduced in person requirements on days without direct client contact

Temporary adjustments to reimbursements and fleet car use

Some organisations are reviewing or increasing reimbursement rates to alleviate financial pressures for staff. Agencies with fleet cars are also reviewing arrangements for the use of these resources to ensure they're used effectively and efficiently. Fleet cars are a major issue for the sector.

Service delivery adaptations

Shifting to online and phone-based support

Virtual modalities are being expanded, where possible, partly in response to client needs to conserve fuel.

Place-based service delivery

Some agencies are relocating appointments to local centres close to families, including schools and community hubs, and to reduce the travel burden on both staff and clients.

Planning to preserve outreach

Maintaining outreach services is one of the greatest concerns across the sector, especially for agencies covering large geographical areas. Agencies are being strategic about how they deploy resources and are planning for scenarios and risks that may arise as the fuel crisis continues.

Operational and risk management responses

Business Continuity Plan (BCP) activation

Several organisations have activated BCPs, in full or in part; have started incorporating fuel volatility scenarios into risk frameworks; and are planning for how fuel volatility scenarios could affect services.

Monitoring fuel expenditure and trends

Agencies are tracking fuel spending, forecasting future cost impacts, and building revised projections into the next financial year's budget. Some expect 100% increases in fuel costs and are preparing accordingly.

Fuel procurement strategies

Practical measures include:

- Filling fleet vehicles mid-week when prices are lower
- Maintaining tanks above 50% to avoid shortages
- Prioritising preferred fuel suppliers to reduce merchant fees
- Using correct fuel types to minimise waste

Revising service directives

Some services are preparing to return to COVID-style delivery models if fuel shortages escalate, including:

- Reduced home visits
- Increased virtual contact
- Essential service classification protocols

Client-focused mitigation strategies

Expanded emergency relief (ER) support

Agencies are doing what they can to support clients seeking:

- Fuel vouchers
- Taxi vouchers
- Grocery vouchers
- Material aid (food, essentials)

Some are redirecting unspent brokerage to offset transport costs. Agencies that do not provide emergency relief are directing clients to local services for support.

Expanding service access options

Examples include:

- Meeting families at schools instead of homes
- Offering regional drop in sessions
- Using client preferred locations to minimise unnecessary travel

Staff support and wellbeing

Financial pressure mitigation

Organisations are exploring:

- Temporary increases to travel reimbursement
- Enabling greater access to fleet vehicles
- One-off supports for workers in extreme hardship

Addressing financial pressure is one of the main ways agencies are seeking to mitigate stress on staff during the fuel crisis, along with offering greater flexibility in their work where possible.

Wellbeing support

Given heightened staff stress, reminiscent of early in the COVID-19 pandemic, agencies are encouraging access to EAP for support, along with increased leadership from managers and executives. Several agencies commented on the increased risk of staff burnout.

Equity considerations

Some members of the sector workforce are disproportionately affected by the fuel crisis, including rural workers, placement students, and staff without fleet access. Organisations are reviewing:

- Distribution of fleet vehicles
- Carpooling arrangements
- Flexible rostering to reduce commuting

Emerging mitigation practice patterns

Across the sector, several consistent themes of effective mitigation are emerging, building on experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. **Early and proactive business continuity planning** - BCPs that include fuel shortage triggers enable smoother transitions to remote or hybrid models.
2. **Geographic optimisation of service delivery** - Mapping tools and informal geographic clustering are reducing unnecessary travel.
3. **Clear internal communication and policy guidance** - Frequent executive level check ins to support consistency and staff confidence.
4. **Prioritising essential contact** - Agencies are refining decision making about what requires in person support versus online alternatives.
5. **Flexibility for staff** - Flexible work and scheduling arrangements are easing household cost pressures and supporting retention.
6. **Enhanced brokerage and emergency relief** - Ensuring families can attend appointments, school, and essential services remains a high priority.

Key risks despite mitigation efforts

While agencies are adapting creatively, several systemic risks persist:

- Reduced capacity to sight children and assess family home environments
- Increased client disengagement due to travel barriers
- Rising service delivery costs exceeding program budgets
- Disproportionate impacts on rural/regional communities
- Growing staff pressures on staff, including financial strain

These risks indicate the need for coordinated system-level support.

Key asks for sector support

The Centre is calling for urgent support to stabilise service delivery and ensure families remain connected to the supports they need, including:

1. Emergency relief funding for families

Fuel vouchers, taxi support, grocery assistance, and flexible brokerage to enable children and families to access education, health care, and essential appointments.

2. Support for the frontline workforce and students on placement

Temporary travel allowances and subsidies for frontline staff and students completing unpaid sector placements, greater flexibility to work from home, and priority access to fuel to maintain outreach and crisis response. Recognition of child and family services as essential services in any fuel rationing scenario.

3. Supplementary operational funding

Additional resources to cover surging fuel and transport costs, particularly for services with large regional footprints.

4. Flexibility in service delivery requirements

Consistent, sector-wide guidance from the State Government on expectations during fuel instability, clear protocols for temporary arrangements, and flexibility to modify service delivery when necessary.

5. Targeted support for regional and rural communities

Transport subsidies, localised service delivery models, and recognition of the unique travel burdens experienced outside metropolitan areas. Additional support for disaster-affected families reliant on diesel-powered generators.

Conclusion

Victorian child and family service providers are responding to the fuel crisis with agility, drawing on lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and implementing pragmatic strategies to safeguard service continuity. While these adaptive measures are reducing immediate risks, the fuel crisis poses challenges that cannot be resolved at solely at organisational level. Coordinated advocacy, additional funding, and clear government guidance will be critical to maintaining equitable, safe, and effective support for families across Victoria.