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PROGRAMME



From Retention to Resilience: Strengthening MPI's Veterinary Workforce

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I wish to thank the Kellogg Programme Investing Partners for their continued support.



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Executive Summary

Veterinarians in the Ministry for Primary Industries' (MPI) Verification Services (VS) are essential to New Zealand's food safety, biosecurity, and export assurance systems. Despite their essential role, MPI faces ongoing challenges in attracting, retaining, and supporting veterinarians, especially in rural, shift-based, and sole-charge positions. This research, conducted through the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme, explores these challenges and identifies practical strategies to enhance veterinary retention, engagement, and workforce resilience.

Key Findings

Eight interrelated factors influence veterinary retention at MPI:

- Leadership visibility and recognition: Limited connection with senior leadership and inconsistent recognition practices.
- Line manager capability: The quality of local leadership significantly shapes daily job satisfaction.
- Career development: Limited clear pathways for progression and inconsistent access to Continuing Professional Development (CPD).
- Organisational structure and agency: Centralised decision-making reduces veterinarians' ability to influence their work environments.
- Workload and flexibility: Rigid rostering and inadequate relief cover negatively impact wellbeing.
- Onboarding and early attrition: Inconsistent induction processes lead to early disengagement.
- Career adaptability and return: Opportunities for flexible roles can retain veterinarians who initially leave.
- Purpose alignment: Lack of clarity regarding the regulatory nature of roles contributes to early dissatisfaction.

Recommendations

To strengthen veterinary retention and resilience, MPI could:

- Reinstate structured onboarding and mentorship programmes.
- Develop transparent, flexible career pathways across VS and MPI.
- Standardise and promote equitable access to CPD, focusing on both technical and soft skills.
- Enhance rostering, relief planning, and leave management.
- Empower Veterinary Technical Supervisor 1s (VTS1s) and provide comprehensive leadership training.
- Encourage peer-led innovation to increase frontline agency and ownership.
- Reassess the requirement for full-time on-site veterinary presence.
- Strengthen recruitment communication and purpose alignment during onboarding.
- Align Remuneration and Responsibility for VTS1 Roles

Additionally, veterinarians themselves are encouraged to proactively engage in professional development, peer support networks, and contribute positively to team culture.

Improving retention involves more than keeping staff, it requires designing supportive, engaging systems where veterinarians thrive. Addressing these structural and cultural factors will enable MPI to sustain a resilient, future-ready veterinary workforce.

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Table of Contents

From Retention to Resilience: Strengthening MPI's Veterinary Workforce	1
Executive Summary	3
Acknowledgements	4
Table of Contents	5
Abbreviations and Definitions	7
1. Introduction	8
2. Aims and Objectives	9
3. Literature Review	10
3.1 Introduction	10
3.2 Key Factors Influencing Veterinary Retention at MPI.....	10
3.2.1 Overview of Key Factors	10
3.2.2 Compensation and Financial Recognition.....	10
3.2.3 Work-Life Balance and Mental Health	11
3.2.4 Career Development and Progression	12
3.2.5 Recognition, Organisational Culture, and Veterinary Retention	12
3.3 The Wider Environmental Influences on Veterinary Retention.....	13
3.3.1 Navigating Regulatory, Social, and Community Expectations.....	13
3.3.2 External Expectations and the Role of Soft Skills in Regulatory Practice	13
3.3.3 Sector Requirements and Regulation	14
3.4 Conclusion.....	14
4 Methodology.....	16
4.1 Research Design.....	16
4.2 Data Collection Methods.....	16
4.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews.....	16
4.2.2 Survey	16
4.2.3 Organisational Data	16
4.3 Data Analysis.....	17
4.4 Ethical Considerations	17
4.5 Limitations	17
5 Analysis and Results	18
5.1 Key Themes from Interviews and Survey Responses	18
5.1.1 Leadership, Organisational Support, and Bureaucracy	18
5.1.2 Career Development, Professional Growth, and Recognition	18
5.1.3 Onboarding, Expectation Setting, and Early Role Fit	20
5.1.4 Workload, Rostering, and Work-Life Balance	21
5.1.5 Organisational Identity, Professional Fulfilment, and Purpose	21

Summary	22
5.2 Recruitment and Turnover Trends in MPI VS	22
5.2.1 MPI-Wide and VS Recruitment	22
5.2.2 Time to Fill and Candidate Sources	22
5.2.3 Turnover Analysis	23
5.2.4 Role Distribution of Turnover.....	23
5.3 Informal Trends Observed Through Internal Placement Insights.....	24
5.3.1 Early Attrition and Expectation Mismatch.....	24
5.3.2 Returning Veterinarians and Flexible Re-Engagement	24
5.4 Summary.....	25
6 Findings and Discussion	26
6.1 Leadership, Recognition, and Organisational Support	26
6.1.2 Line Manager Capability and Development	27
6.2 Career Development and Structural Constraints.....	28
6.2.1 Peer-Led Innovation and Role Design.....	29
6.2.2 Barriers to Advancement: The VTS2 to VTS1 Transition.....	29
6.2.3 Summary	29
6.3 Workload, Rostering, and Retention Pressures.....	30
6.4 Onboarding, Retention Risk, and Role Fit	30
6.5 Summary of Influencing Factors	31
7 Conclusions.....	33
Looking Ahead	33
8 Recommendations	35
8.1 Organisational Strategies for MPI	35
8.2 Self-Empowerment Strategies for MPI Veterinarians	41
9 Final Reflections	43
10 References.....	44
11 Appendices.....	46
Appendix 1: Interview Questions	46
Appendix 2: Question Tree	48
Appendix 3: HR Data Summary	49

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Abbreviations and Definitions

Abbreviation	Definition
CEA	Collective Employee Agreement
Circuit	Staff employed to undertake verification and certification related activity at non-full-time premises
CPD	Continuing Professional Development – structured learning to maintain and enhance veterinary knowledge and skills
EAP	Employee Assistance Programme – confidential support services available to MPI staff for personal or work-related issues
Establishment	Staff employed to undertake verification and certification related activity at full time meat processing establishment
HR	Human Resources – MPI business unit responsible for recruitment, development, and retention of staff
MPI	Ministry for Primary Industries
NZVA	New Zealand Veterinary Association – the professional body representing veterinarians in New Zealand
VCNZ	Veterinary Council of New Zealand – the statutory regulator responsible for registering veterinarians and maintaining professional standards
VS	Verification Services – the directorate within MPI responsible for delivering regulatory oversight of food safety, biosecurity, and export assurances
VTs1	Veterinary Technical Supervisor 1 – a senior verifier role with broader technical scope and increased responsibility
VTs2	Veterinary Technical Supervisor – a warranted veterinarian delivering verification and certification services within VS

1. Introduction

Veterinarians working in regulatory roles at the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) play a vital role in supporting New Zealand's food safety, biosecurity, and animal welfare systems. These professionals, mostly based within Verification Services (VS), contribute to the smooth functioning of essential export processes, maintain public trust in food production, and uphold New Zealand's trade reputation. Whether verifying compliance at meat processing establishments, providing export certification, or responding to emerging biosecurity matters, MPI veterinarians help maintain the systems that underpin both market access and public assurance.

New Zealand's economy is closely tied to the success of its primary industries. Food and fibre exports account for around 81% of goods exports and approximately 24% of national GDP (New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, 2023). Within this context, MPI veterinarians ensure that products meet domestic and international standards, and they are instrumental in safeguarding the country's ability to respond to biosecurity events such as Foot-and-Mouth Disease, which could have far-reaching economic consequences (Kirk & McDermott, 2020; Ministry for Primary Industries, 2023).

Attracting and retaining skilled veterinarians is an important part of ensuring continuity and capability within MPI's regulatory workforce. Like their peers globally, MPI veterinarians navigate a range of professional and operational challenges - such as workload management, geographic placement, shift-based rosters, and balancing regulatory responsibilities with collaborative relationships. These challenges are not unique to MPI, but the organisation is well positioned to learn from sector insights and the experiences of its own staff to strengthen support systems and promote long-term career satisfaction.

Research highlights that, across the veterinary industry, key factors influencing veterinary retention include leadership support, access to development opportunities, professional recognition, and work-life balance (Brown, 2023; Gallup, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2020). Addressing these factors collaboratively, across leadership, HR, and frontline roles, can support a more engaged and sustainable workforce.

This research, conducted through the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme, aims to identify and address key factors influencing veterinary retention and engagement at MPI. Through qualitative and quantitative analyses, including literature reviews, interviews, surveys, and internal data, eight key factors were identified as critical to veterinary retention: leadership visibility, line manager capability, career development, organisational structure, workload flexibility, onboarding quality, career adaptability, and purpose alignment.

This report provides actionable recommendations to strengthen veterinary workforce resilience by improving leadership practices, enhancing career development pathways, standardising onboarding processes, increasing flexibility in workload management, and fostering greater alignment between individual roles and MPI's broader mission.

By systematically addressing these factors, MPI can create a more supportive, engaged, and resilient veterinary workforce capable of meeting current and future demands.

2. Aims and Objectives

This research seeks to understand the key factors influencing the retention and career satisfaction of veterinarians working in VS at MPI and to identify actionable strategies that can enhance career sustainability, workforce stability, and national resilience.

The project aims to explore what MPI veterinarians need to remain engaged, supported, and professionally fulfilled, and how MPI can more effectively deliver that support. The research focuses on veterinarians working across Establishment, Circuit, Certification, and specialist roles in a variety of operational contexts, including regional and shift-based settings.

Objectives:

- Identify the key challenges influencing retention, satisfaction, and wellbeing of veterinarians in MPI's VS.
- Understand veterinarians' perceptions of leadership, communication, performance expectations, and organisational support.
- Capture lived experiences through qualitative interviews and a survey to highlight common themes.
- Integrate these insights with internal workforce data from HR and People and Capability teams to strengthen findings.
- Provide practical, evidence-based recommendations for VS Senior leadership, HR, and operational managers to help shape a more sustainable, attractive, and resilient veterinary career environment.

By addressing these objectives, this research aims to provide meaningful insights to inform MPI's workforce planning, leadership development, and policy direction, supporting the long-term sustainability of the veterinary workforce and enhancing New Zealand's biosecurity resilience.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

The retention of veterinarians, particularly in regulatory roles such as those at the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI), is important in maintaining food safety, animal welfare, biosecurity, and compliance with public health regulations. Regulatory veterinarians are tasked with responsibilities requiring specialised expertise in food systems, response, and trade responsibilities. The unique nature of these roles, including varied workloads, emotional stress, limited career advancement opportunities, and geographic isolation, presents significant retention challenges (Kogan, Booth, & Rishniw, 2020; Jensen & Merle, 2020).

Veterinary oversight contributes directly to New Zealand's national resilience, given the importance of food and fibre exports to the economy (New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, 2023). With threats such as Foot-and-Mouth Disease posing substantial economic risk (MPI, 2023), sustaining the veterinary workforce is a matter of public interest.

Existing literature predominantly focuses on veterinary retention in clinical and private practice settings, with fewer studies examining the specific challenges faced by veterinarians working in regulatory or government environments (Sorn et al., 2021). This gap is notable considering the distinct pressures faced by veterinarians at MPI, such as regulatory complexity, shift work, geographic isolation, and biosecurity responsibilities.

3.2 Key Factors Influencing Veterinary Retention at MPI

3.2.1 Overview of Key Factors

Veterinarians in public sector roles face a combination of internal and external pressures that influence job satisfaction and workforce stability. Research by Kogan, Booth, and Rishniw (2020) and Sorn et al. (2021) identifies key themes common across regulatory veterinary sectors: emotional exhaustion, restricted career growth, perceived inequities in recognition and pay, and variable organisational culture. These dynamics are mirrored in MPI's VS, where veterinarians must navigate compliance responsibilities, operational stress, and the complexity of regulatory systems, often in rural or sole-charge contexts.

A recurring finding across literature is that veterinary retention is shaped by multiple interconnected factors, not a single issue. Emotional wellbeing, professional identity, access to development, and perceptions of fairness all play a role in shaping the experience and longevity of veterinarians in the public sector (Whitaker et al., 2020; Fletcher et al., 2020).

3.2.2 Compensation and Financial Recognition

The relationship between compensation and veterinary retention is complex. Sorn et al. (2021) highlight that while salary is an important factor, it rarely acts alone in driving employee retention; career development, workplace recognition, and work-life balance are equally influential. Similarly, Gallup (2020) emphasises that non-financial rewards, such as opportunities for growth and regular recognition, play a significant role in fostering staff loyalty across professional sectors.

Concerns around compensation have been raised within MPI's VS workforce, particularly in Establishment roles. Veterinarians often perceive that regulatory salaries are lower than those available in private clinical practice. However, definitive national data comparing salaries across regulatory and clinical veterinary sectors in New Zealand remains limited. As noted by Shiri et al. (2020) and Fletcher et al. (2020), perceptions of fairness in compensation, even

when not based on verified discrepancies, can have a strong influence on job satisfaction and retention.

Several contributing factors may shape these perceptions:

- The level of responsibility and compliance demands in regulatory roles (Brown, 2023)
- Shift work and rural or sole-charge placements that affect lifestyle and work intensity (Fletcher et al., 2020)
- Limited opportunities for rapid salary progression compared to private practice (Veterinary Voices, 2024)
- A lack of transparent communication around progression frameworks, despite the clear salary structures set out in the CEA (Moir & Van den Brink, 2020)

Research shows that perceptions of unfair compensation (whether or not they reflect actual discrepancies) can negatively affect morale, engagement, and long-term retention in the vet industry in general (Fletcher et al., 2020; Veterinary Voices, 2024). International literature recommends strategies such as transparent pay structures, performance-based progression models, and clear communication around total remuneration packages to build trust and support retention (Gallup, 2020; Sorn et al., 2021).

Overall, the literature supports a holistic approach to financial recognition, situating remuneration within a wider framework that values leadership, development, wellbeing, and professional identity.

3.2.3 Work-Life Balance and Mental Health

Work-life balance strongly influences job satisfaction, wellbeing, and retention in the veterinary profession. Within MPI's Verification Services, Establishment veterinarians often face rostered shifts—including nights, weekends, and public holidays—alongside geographic isolation and operational pressures, contributing to fatigue, isolation, and burnout risks (Moir & Van den Brink, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2020). In contrast, Circuit veterinarians typically experience greater autonomy, more predictable schedules, and varied work environments. These structural differences shape veterinarians' work-life balance and contribute to differing levels of wellbeing and retention.

Moir and Van den Brink (2020) and Fletcher et al. (2020) highlight that poor work-life balance, coupled with high emotional exhaustion, is closely associated with burnout and attrition. Flexible work arrangements, predictable rosters, and access to mental health support are consistently identified as key strategies for improving retention.

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) are widely implemented across regulatory organisations, but their effectiveness is often linked to visibility, cultural uptake, and leadership endorsement. International best practice suggests that proactive and normalised promotion of mental health services is essential for sustainable workforce wellbeing (Fletcher et al., 2020).

The literature recommends a combination of structural and cultural interventions, including:

- Reducing the frequency of night and weekend shifts
- Improving scheduling predictability and team coordination
- Promoting access to confidential mental health services
- Embedding wellbeing initiatives into daily practice with visible leadership support

Together, these measures can help reduce occupational stress and improve professional engagement, particularly in roles with high compliance demands and limited flexibility.

3.2.4 Career Development and Progression

Access to meaningful career development opportunities is a strong predictor of veterinary engagement and retention. Brown (2023) and Whitaker et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of clear progression pathways, structured mentorship, and leadership development to reduce turnover and sustain long-term job satisfaction. Without these, veterinarians may experience professional stagnation, leading to frustration and disengagement.

Veterinary roles within regulatory and public sector environments present distinct challenges compared to clinical practice. In these settings, professional growth may be perceived as limited due to fewer visible advancement opportunities and less informal support. Whitaker et al. (2020) and Shiri et al. (2020) note that when development is inconsistent or unclear, veterinarians are more likely to consider leaving for roles that offer clearer progression.

CPD is increasingly seen as essential—particularly when it includes both technical and non-technical skillsets. The VetSet2Go project and the Veterinary Council of New Zealand (VCNZ, 2020) highlight the value of competencies such as communication, leadership, adaptability, and resilience, alongside traditional expertise.

The literature consistently recommends that veterinary organisations prioritise:

- Structured mentorship for early- and mid-career veterinarians
- Transparent career progression frameworks with defined criteria
- Leadership development programmes tailored to regulatory contexts
- Consistent access to CPD, including support for participation and funding

While these recommendations are well supported internationally (Brown, 2023; Whitaker et al., 2020; Fletcher et al., 2020), there remains a gap in evaluating how such development models function specifically in regulatory settings like MPI. Further sector-specific research would support the design of targeted retention strategies that strengthen veterinary workforce resilience.

3.2.5 Recognition, Organisational Culture, and Veterinary Retention

Understanding what influences veterinary retention and satisfaction is essential for designing effective workforce strategies. Research consistently highlights that veterinary retention in regulatory settings is shaped by a combination of financial, emotional, developmental, and cultural factors (Sorn et al., 2021; Kogan, Booth, & Rishniw, 2020). In particular, the alignment between individual purpose and organisational values, access to growth opportunities, visible recognition, and a positive workplace culture all contribute to whether veterinarians remain engaged in their roles.

Veterinarians working in regulatory environments often face high compliance expectations, operational stress, and limited flexibility. In this context, the workplace culture—and how well it supports professional identity, autonomy, and wellbeing—can significantly influence retention outcomes (Whitaker et al., 2020). Fletcher et al. (2020) note that veterinarians are more likely to stay when they feel supported by leadership, recognised for their contributions, and included in organisational goals.

Recognition—both formal and informal—is a key part of this. Gallup (2020) and Whitaker et al. (2020) report that employees who feel valued are more engaged and less likely to leave. Recognition of not only technical performance but also interpersonal and leadership contributions is particularly important in regulatory settings, where relationship management and decision-making under pressure are routine aspects of the role.

The literature recommends:

- Recognition systems that celebrate individual and team achievements, innovation, and leadership
- Constructive feedback mechanisms that reinforce both performance and professional growth
- Visible, responsive leadership styles that support engagement, inclusion, and trust
- A workplace culture that fosters professional respect, autonomy, and shared purpose (Brown, 2023)

Retention strategies are most effective when they are embedded in a broader organisational approach that actively promotes career development, wellbeing, recognition, and inclusive leadership. In the context of MPI's VS, these elements can help build a resilient, engaged, and sustainable veterinary workforce.

3.3 The Wider Environmental Influences on Veterinary Retention

3.3.1 Navigating Regulatory, Social, and Community Expectations

In addition to internal organisational dynamics, veterinarians working in regulatory roles are significantly influenced by external pressures such as regulatory frameworks, societal expectations, market access requirements, and public health demands. These external forces add complexity to their daily work environment and directly affect retention and career satisfaction.

Guy (2013) notes that veterinarians in rural and regulatory roles, especially in New Zealand, operate in environments where public visibility and regulatory expectations are elevated. MPI veterinarians play a key role in ensuring that animal products comply with both domestic and international standards, particularly for high-value export destinations such as the European Union. This responsibility often includes maintaining a consistent veterinary presence at processing establishments, which supports market eligibility but can also limit flexibility in work arrangements.

Beyond regulatory compliance, veterinarians embedded within processing facilities face additional interpersonal challenges. Unlike clinical practice, where veterinarians work collaboratively with clients, regulatory veterinarians are tasked with auditing and enforcing standards among plant staff and operators daily. This dual role, maintaining respectful professional relationships while also exercising regulatory authority, can create emotional tension and increase the risk of role conflict, stress, and professional isolation.

Veterinarians living in small rural communities may experience unique pressures due to the overlap between their personal and professional lives. This dual exposure, where veterinarians interact with plant staff during work hours and encounter the same individuals in community or social settings, can heighten feelings of scrutiny, emotional fatigue, and reduced privacy. Recent research indicates that rural veterinarians often face increased stress from this role integration, particularly when community visibility compounds the challenges of regulatory decision-making (Crawford et al., 2023; Hendricks & Morton, 2023).

3.3.2 External Expectations and the Role of Soft Skills in Regulatory Practice

Veterinarians working in regulatory roles are required to balance the expectations of a wide range of external stakeholders, including regulatory authorities, plant operators, government agencies, and the wider public. As noted in Section 3.3.1, these competing demands

(particularly when stakeholder expectations exceed the resources or authority available) can contribute significantly to stress and professional disengagement (Kogan, Booth, & Rishniw, 2020).

Within regulatory environments, veterinarians are often placed in situations where they must enforce standards while maintaining collaborative relationships with those they regulate. This dual responsibility can lead to tension, frustration, and professional isolation if not well supported. Research highlights the importance of developing strong non-technical skills, such as communication, negotiation, and emotional resilience, to manage these dynamics effectively (Fletcher et al., 2020; Brown, 2023).

Whitaker et al. (2020) and Veterinary Voices (2024) further emphasise that soft skill development is closely linked to professional satisfaction and retention in regulatory contexts. Veterinarians who are confident in managing external relationships and interpersonal challenges are more likely to remain engaged and committed to public service roles.

Internationally, targeted training in these areas has been recommended to help regulatory veterinarians manage stakeholder complexity and reduce work-related stress (Fletcher et al., 2020; Brown, 2023).

3.3.3 Sector Requirements and Regulation

The regulatory environment, with its high expectations for compliance and oversight, plays a significant role in shaping the professional experience of veterinarians in regulatory roles. Jensen and Merle (2020) note that navigating complex biosecurity and public health standards can be demanding and may contribute to emotional fatigue over time. MPI veterinarians work to ensure compliance with both national and international requirements, while also managing the multifaceted risks associated with food safety and animal health. This balancing act requires strong professional judgement and adaptability, especially when dealing with evolving market access conditions and regulatory protocols.

Research highlights that continuous access to professional training and support structures is important in mitigating stress and enhancing job satisfaction for veterinarians working in regulatory environments (Kogan, Booth, & Rishniw, 2020). Kogan et al. (2020) suggest that organisations that offer regular training in regulatory compliance and public health management, combined with access to psychological wellbeing support, are better able to sustain workforce resilience and reduce the risk of burnout.

These findings underscore the role that organisational training, emotional support, and professional development initiatives can play in improving retention and satisfaction among regulatory veterinary professionals.

3.4 Conclusion

The literature clearly illustrates that veterinary retention in regulatory roles such as those within MPI's VS is shaped by a complex relationship of organisational, professional, and environmental factors. While compensation, work-life balance, and access to career development remain central concerns, retention is also influenced by perceptions of fairness, recognition, and the quality of leadership and workplace culture.

Veterinarians in regulatory roles face unique challenges compared to their clinical counterparts, including shift-based work, professional isolation, and the dual responsibility of maintaining regulatory authority while fostering collaborative relationships. These challenges

are often intensified in rural placements and high-compliance environments, where personal and professional boundaries frequently overlap.

The literature consistently recommends a multifaceted approach to improving retention. This includes strengthening leadership visibility, promoting wellbeing, supporting structured development pathways, and embedding recognition practices into everyday operations. Soft skill development and supportive organisational systems are particularly relevant in regulatory contexts, where emotional resilience and interpersonal skills are essential.

Despite a growing body of international research, there is a gap in evidence specific to the New Zealand regulatory veterinary workforce. Addressing this knowledge gap through sector-specific inquiry can inform tailored strategies to strengthen veterinary retention, improve workforce satisfaction, and support MPI's capacity to deliver on its food safety, biosecurity, and trade mandates.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This research used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection to explore the key factors influencing veterinary retention within MPI's VS. The mixed-methods strategy was selected to ensure both depth and breadth of understanding - capturing lived experiences through interviews and supporting these insights with broader survey data. This approach reflects best practice in applied workforce research and was intended to build a clear, evidence-informed view of the challenges and opportunities facing MPI's veterinary workforce.

The study was developed as part of the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme, with an applied focus on generating practical, experience-based recommendations to support workforce planning at MPI.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

4.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with veterinarians across MPI's VS. Participants included veterinarians from Establishment, Circuit, Certification, and Specialist roles across MPI VS. While most interviewees were in frontline operational roles, a small number held management or technical specialist positions, providing valuable leadership perspectives.

The interviews followed a pre-developed question framework (Appendix 1) but allowed flexibility for deeper discussion. Topics included onboarding, career development, workload, leadership, and organisational culture. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes and were held via Microsoft Teams.

4.2.2 Survey

An anonymous online survey was shared with veterinarians in VS who responded to a general call for participants. The survey included the same questions used in the semi-structured interviews and consisted of 49 items presented in a mix of multiple-choice and open-text formats. Seventeen veterinarians completed the full survey, with partial responses also included in the qualitative analysis where relevant.

4.2.3 Organisational Data

Supporting data were gathered from MPI's HR and People and Capability teams. This included information on turnover rates, recruitment metrics, development programme participation, and internal mobility trends.

Additional informal workforce data were also considered, including summaries of VTS2 to VTS1 transitions, reasons for departure from VS, and length of service prior to exit. These insights provided valuable context around early attrition patterns and perceived barriers to progression. Together, the formal and informal data helped to contextualise interview and survey findings and highlight broader workforce trends.

4.3 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and open-text responses were analysed thematically using inductive coding. Recurring themes and sub-themes were identified based on consistent patterns across responses. A manual coding process was used to maintain closeness to the data.

Quantitative survey responses were analysed descriptively to identify general trends in satisfaction, leadership, development access, and workload. Given the small sample size, no statistical testing was performed.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the research purpose and assured of confidentiality. Interview participation was voluntary, with written consent obtained prior to each interview. Interviewees could withdraw at any point without consequence. Survey responses were anonymous, with no identifying information collected. All findings are presented in aggregate form to protect individual identities.

As the project was undertaken as part of the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme and not as a formal academic study, ethics committee approval was not required. However, standard professional research ethics were followed throughout.

4.5 Limitations

This project does not provide an exhaustive analysis of veterinary retention and career satisfaction within MPI, due to the time constraints of the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme and the defined scope of the research. The findings present key themes and indicative insights based on a limited qualitative sample, rather than a comprehensive review of all variables influencing veterinary retention.

The semi-structured interviews were limited to veterinarians currently employed within MPI's VS. Although participants represented a range of roles and career stages, the absence of perspectives from those who have exited MPI introduces survivor bias - meaning the study may disproportionately reflect the views of veterinarians who are more satisfied or resilient within the system. As a result, factors contributing to early or permanent attrition may be underrepresented. Future research would benefit from incorporating confidential exit interviews or post-exit surveys tailored to veterinary professionals to better understand the full spectrum of experiences and departure drivers.

The study did not explore how factors such as gender, ethnicity, family status, or international qualification might affect retention and career progression. These considerations are important and warrant further research, particularly in remote or sole-charge roles.

The research also did not include interviews with wider organisational stakeholders or cross-agency representatives, which limited the ability to explore how external policy or sector-level dynamics may influence veterinary retention at MPI.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide valuable insights and contribute meaningfully to the ongoing conversation about strengthening MPI's veterinary workforce.

5 Analysis and Results

5.1 Key Themes from Interviews and Survey Responses

Thematic analysis of nine semi-structured interviews and seventeen survey responses from veterinarians across MPI's VS revealed five major interrelated themes: leadership and organisational support, career development and recognition, onboarding and role fit, workload and work-life balance, and professional fulfilment and purpose. These themes reflect both challenges and opportunities for improving engagement, job satisfaction, and long-term retention.

5.1.1 Leadership, Organisational Support, and Bureaucracy

Concerns about leadership visibility, inconsistent communication, and a disconnect between senior decision-makers and operational realities were dominant across interviews and surveys. Veterinarians often described feeling isolated from senior leadership, with limited opportunity to contribute to decisions that directly impact their daily work.

"The managers I work with directly are great, but above them, there's no real connection or visibility. They don't understand the realities on the ground."

"Leadership needs to get out of Wellington more. It's hard to feel like you're part of something when you never see anyone senior unless there's a problem."

MPI's bureaucratic systems were also raised as a point of frustration. Veterinarians felt constrained by top-down directives that lacked input from those doing the work on the ground.

"There's this mysterious unknown, and then something gets handed down from on high and dictated to us. It's not really coming from where we are."

This frustration was particularly strong around national audits and calibration processes, where inconsistent messaging caused confusion across teams.

Many veterinarians expressed a desire for flatter leadership models, more collaboration, and stronger engagement with frontline staff. However, this also highlights a tension: while flatter structures imply more shared decision-making, several participants acknowledged that stepping into decision-making roles requires confidence, accountability, and the willingness to own outcomes—something not all staff are prepared or feel supported to do.

This underscores the need for leadership development at all levels—not just among formal leaders, but also among veterinarians who want a greater say in how their work is shaped and delivered.

5.1.2 Career Development, Professional Growth, and Recognition

Career development opportunities emerged as a significant factor influencing long-term veterinary satisfaction and retention at MPI. While veterinarians acknowledged the initial

technical development provided through induction and training programmes, many reported a sense of plateauing within a few years of service, particularly if they were not pursuing management pathways.

"Unless you want to be a manager, there's nowhere to go."

This perception of career stagnation aligns with wider workforce research (Whitaker et al. 2020; Brown, 2023), which highlights the importance of structured development pathways and accessible CPD in retaining technical professionals. Survey feedback indicated variability in CPD access across teams and regions. Some veterinarians felt well-supported, while others reported having to "fight" for development time amid operational pressures.

MPI has introduced several positive initiatives - including the Mentoring Programme, Technical Development Programme, and Leadership and Talent Identification process. However, awareness and access to these programmes was inconsistent across the staff interviewed/surveyed.

A key issue identified was the reluctance to take up available leadership roles, particularly the move from VTS2 to VTS1. Participants highlighted several barriers that made this transition unappealing:

- Peer management without authority: VTS1s are responsible for site performance but have limited tools or support to manage underperformance or conflict among peers, leading to high stress and frustration.

"If VTS2s perform badly or have personal issues, VTS1s have an extremely limited ability to act but have to manage the consequences."

- Lifestyle and financial disincentives: Shift-based VTS2 roles offer more favourable overtime and penal rates than salaried VTS1 positions, making the move to VTS1 less appealing for some.

"Night shift suits my life better — and it pays more."

- Lack of confidence in recruitment processes: Some veterinarians described poor interview experiences, limited feedback, and a general lack of transparency when applying for promotion.

"I was encouraged to apply, had a bad interview experience, and got no honest feedback. It knocks your confidence."

- Desire to reduce job stress: For those who had left clinical practice due to high pressure, the added responsibilities of a supervisory role were seen as a step backwards in terms of work-life balance.

While some veterinarians were hesitant to move from VTS2 to VTS1, others expressed strong interest in progressing to Team Leader or Team Manager positions. However, these opportunities rarely arose, particularly in specialist areas like Circuit, Live Animal, or Certification. Several participants noted that they would value access to secondments, acting opportunities, or structured development pathways to help them prepare for these roles in future.

Providing more regular access to higher duties and project-based leadership opportunities could help veterinarians position themselves for advancement, whether within VS or across MPI more broadly. This would also support internal mobility and build a stronger leadership pipeline, even in the absence of frequent vacancies.

It would also support succession planning, particularly in smaller teams where formal roles don't arise often.

These insights reinforce that formal progression pathways are not enough. If MPI wants to retain motivated, experienced staff, it must ensure that those pathways are visible, supported, and practically accessible - whether through technical development, leadership roles, or cross-directorate transitions.

5.1.3 Onboarding, Expectation Setting, and Early Role Fit

Onboarding experiences among MPI veterinarians were highly variable and emerged as a significant influence on early career satisfaction and retention. Some veterinarians described positive induction experiences with strong mentorship and gradual exposure to operational responsibilities, while others reported feeling unprepared, unsupported, and rushed into sole-charge or high-pressure roles.

"My first site was great — my buddy was supportive, and I had time to learn. But I know others who were sent to fill urgent gaps before they were ready."

"Onboarding is highly variable. It depends where you land and who's around to support you."

Several veterinarians indicated that inadequate onboarding contributed to early stress, role mismatch, and attrition risk, particularly in Establishment placements. Inconsistent onboarding standards across regions also led to discrepancies in expectations, calibration, and performance feedback between different teams.

In addition to onboarding challenges, many participants expressed a lack of clear expectation-setting during the recruitment phase. Some veterinarians entered MPI roles without fully understanding the regulatory nature of the work, the enforcement responsibilities involved, or the realities of shift-based site work.

"If someone had explained what the job really involved, I might have made a different decision — or at least been better prepared."

Participants emphasised that strengthening onboarding processes, mentorship support, and early expectation management would be critical to improving role fit, building early career confidence, and reducing early-stage attrition among MPI veterinarians.

5.1.4 Workload, Rostering, and Work-Life Balance

Workload challenges were a major source of dissatisfaction, particularly for veterinarians in Establishment roles. Shift work, limited leave flexibility, and high processing demands during peak seasons were frequently cited stressors.

"I've had leave declined three times in a row. It's not sustainable. You can't plan a life like that."

"Shift work wears you down. It's not just physical — it affects your sleep, your relationships, your mental health."

Circuit and Certification veterinarians reported a range of experiences depending on the structure of their teams. In some regions, veterinarians working remotely or in Circuit teams described feelings of professional isolation and lower organisational visibility:

"Working from home is great, but you're forgotten. You don't get the same support or recognition."

However, others highlighted strong team connections and regular peer interactions even when working across dispersed sites, suggesting that experiences varied significantly depending on local team culture and management practices.

Despite these challenges, many veterinarians acknowledged positive aspects of regulatory work compared to clinical practice, such as greater job stability, reduced clinical burnout, and clearer role expectations.

"I left clinical practice because of burnout. MPI gave me stability and a predictable income. That's worth a lot."

5.1.5 Organisational Identity, Professional Fulfilment, and Purpose

Transitioning from clinical to regulatory practice presented challenges for many veterinarians. Some initially struggled with the shift away from direct animal care to systems-level public service work.

"It took a while to adjust. You're not treating animals anymore — you're enforcing rules. That's a mindset shift."

Participants emphasised the importance of clear expectation-setting during recruitment and onboarding to mitigate early-stage attrition. Veterinarians who understood and embraced MPI's broader mission of safeguarding New Zealand's food safety and trade reputation reported higher professional fulfilment and longer-term engagement.

"What helped me stay was realising how much impact we have. We're not just ticking boxes — we're protecting New Zealand's reputation."

The need to reinforce the broader purpose and meaning of VS was seen as critical in improving retention, particularly among early-career veterinarians.

Summary

These five interconnected themes provide a clear picture of the organisational and structural factors influencing veterinarian engagement and retention within MPI's VS.

Key influences include the visibility and accessibility of leadership, variability in onboarding and expectation setting, inconsistent support for VTS1s, and limited development options for those not pursuing formal management roles. For many veterinarians, understanding and connecting with MPI's broader purpose in protecting New Zealand's food safety, biosecurity, and trade reputation is a strong contributor to job satisfaction and professional fulfilment. However, this connection is not always made early in the role and is often shaped by experience rather than onboarding.

5.2 Recruitment and Turnover Trends in MPI VS

5.2.1 MPI-Wide and VS Recruitment

Recruitment across MPI has declined significantly over the past three years, from 1,749 hires in 2022 to 944 hires in 2024. This reflects broader cost-saving initiatives, organisational restructuring, and a shift in government priorities following the recruitment peak driven by Budget 2022 investments.

Despite the overall MPI decline, VS roles have become an increasing proportion of MPI hires, rising from 5.1% of total placements in 2022 to 6.7% in 2024. Absolute placement numbers in VS dropped from 89 in 2022 to 63 in 2024, driven predominantly by a fall in non-Establishment placements. Establishment hiring remained relatively stable over the same period.

These figures highlight the front-line nature of VS roles, even amidst broader public sector constriction.

Detailed recruitment data is provided in Appendix 3.

5.2.2 Time to Fill and Candidate Sources

Recruiting veterinarians into Establishment roles continues to present significant challenges. The average time to fill Establishment vacancies was approximately 124 days in 2023 and 116 days in 2024 - far longer than the 4–5 weeks typically required for urban-based non-Establishment positions.

This reflects both the rural and shift-based nature of many Establishment roles, and a continued reliance on international candidates to fill these vacancies. Notably, three of the

six hardest-to-fill Establishment vacancies in 2023–2024 were successfully filled by internationally recruited veterinarians.

Conversely, Certification and Circuit roles typically attracted more New Zealand-based applicants and were filled more quickly, illustrating a structural recruitment divide between rural and urban VS work.

5.2.3 Turnover Analysis

Turnover data shows that veterinary roles consistently experience lower unplanned turnover than the MPI average. While MPI-wide turnover peaked at 22% in 2023, VTS1 and VTS2 turnover steadily declined from 11% in 2021 to 7% in 2024.

Across VS, 72% of departures over the past five years were resignations, 25% were retirements, and only 4% were due to death or dismissal. These patterns reinforce the importance of early retention efforts, particularly addressing the factors that drive resignation.

Qualitative feedback points to common resignation reasons such as career stagnation, workload fatigue, geographic isolation, and a mismatch between role expectations and operational realities. However, there are known gaps in the exit interview process, meaning not all drivers are well understood. For example, veterinarians who left to take up new roles within the wider veterinary system or elsewhere in MPI are not always captured in a way that reflects career progression rather than dissatisfaction.

Without consistent exit data, it is easy to lean into a narrative shaped by those who remain, rather than those who left — a form of survivor bias that can obscure useful insights. Strengthening exit processes and using that data to inform workforce strategy would provide a clearer picture of what's working, what's not, and where there may be opportunities to improve retention by design, not just by default.

Full turnover data is summarised in Appendix 3.

5.2.4 Role Distribution of Turnover

Turnover was concentrated within Establishment roles, which accounted for approximately 82% of all VS exits over the past five years. Circuit roles represented 12%, with Agency Technical and specialist roles comprising the remaining 5%. These figures reflect direct resignations only and do not include internal movements or secondments to other areas within MPI.

Establishment veterinarians make up most of the VS workforce, so the higher percentage of turnover is partly a reflection of scale. However, this also aligns with interview and survey feedback, which pointed to greater challenges in Establishment roles related to shift work, workload intensity, leave access, and professional isolation.

International recruitment continues to be a longstanding and essential strategy for filling veterinary roles, particularly in rural Establishment locations. During 2023–2024, several long-standing vacancies were successfully filled using international channels. However, the global veterinary workforce shortage remains a persistent challenge.

Unlike many other roles, veterinary work requires a specific degree and registration with the Veterinary Council of New Zealand. This narrows the potential talent pool, particularly as only graduates from approved institutions are eligible. While there is often strong interest from experienced veterinarians in Asia and South America, many are not eligible to practise in New Zealand. Interest from North America is more limited, with contributing factors including salary differentials and lifestyle preferences. That said, the VTS salary bands remain

competitive within the New Zealand context and are not considered a major barrier to domestic recruitment.

While HR and recruitment data provide a useful high-level view of hiring and turnover, they don't always reflect the more nuanced reasons behind veterinary departures, re-entry, or internal transfers. The next section draws on informal internal insights and first-hand placement experiences to illustrate additional trends that influence workforce stability within VS.

5.3 Informal Trends Observed Through Internal Placement Insights

In addition to formal HR data and the findings from interviews and surveys, informal insights drawn from MPI's internal tracking of placements and resignations provide further context to the observed patterns of veterinary retention and job satisfaction. While indicative rather than systematic, these observations closely align with broader themes identified in this study and highlight several persistent challenges and opportunities affecting workforce stability.

5.3.1 Early Attrition and Expectation Mismatch

Internal records show that between 2015 and 2025, approximately 41% of resignations from Verification Services occurred within the first 12–24 months of employment. Informal feedback suggests that these early exits were often driven by a mismatch between expectations and the operational realities of regulatory work. Contributing factors included the intensity of shift-based roles, geographic isolation, and the enforcement-focused nature of the job, which some veterinarians found at odds with their anticipated career path or preferred working style.

"I didn't realise how isolating it would be until I got here. It wasn't the veterinary work itself—it was the shift patterns and being away from support."

This insight reinforces the importance of realistic job previews, comprehensive onboarding, and proactive conversations about work-life balance and role expectations during recruitment.

5.3.2 Returning Veterinarians and Flexible Re-Engagement

Encouragingly, MPI has seen a number of veterinarians return to the organisation from the private sector following an initial departure, often in different roles or teams. These returning staff typically re-entered through casual, reliever, or part-time roles, or transitioned into areas outside of Verification Services, such as policy, market access, or trade. Reasons cited for returning included greater role flexibility, reduced shift work, and improved alignment with personal and professional goals.

"After leaving the Establishment role, I returned as a reliever. It suits my lifestyle better, and I still feel like I'm contributing."

"The new role fits me better. If I'd known this was an option earlier, I might not have left in the first place."

These cases highlight an opportunity for MPI to develop structured re-entry pathways and flexible transition models, enabling the retention of institutional knowledge and supporting veterinarians across different stages of their careers.

5.4 Summary

These informal trends reinforce key findings from the formal research: that strengthening early support structures, offering flexible career pathways, and ensuring strong role fit at the outset are vital to sustaining veterinarian engagement and reducing attrition within MPI's VS. Addressing these critical factors will not only improve workforce stability but also enhance the Ministry's capacity to protect New Zealand's food safety, animal welfare, and export economy.

6 Findings and Discussion

This section brings together the findings from interviews, survey responses, internal HR data, and wider literature to provide a comprehensive analysis of the key factors influencing veterinary retention and satisfaction within MPI's VS.

The initial analysis in Section 5 grouped the qualitative data into five broad themes:

1. Leadership and organisational support
2. Career development and recognition,
3. Onboarding and role fit,
4. Workload, rostering, and Retention Pressures
5. Onboarding, Retention Risk and role Fit

These themes provided a clear overview of the main areas affecting engagement and retention.

In this section, the findings are unpacked further into eight specific, interrelated factors. These factors build on the same data but take a closer look at the different elements shaping veterinarians' experiences. This approach allows for more detailed discussion of what's working well, what's not, and where MPI could focus its efforts to better support its veterinary workforce.

The aim is to provide practical insights that can help MPI strengthen workforce sustainability, support wellbeing, and improve long-term retention across VS.

6.1 Leadership, Recognition, and Organisational Support

As outlined in Section 5.1.1, leadership visibility, organisational support, and recognition emerged as key influences on veterinarian satisfaction and retention within VS. While many veterinarians spoke positively about their immediate managers, concerns were raised about the limited visibility of senior leadership and a perceived disconnect between national decision-making and operational realities at the frontline.

Veterinarians described inconsistent communication, minimal opportunities for engagement with senior leaders, and a lack of operational understanding from those setting national strategy. This disconnect contributed to feelings of isolation and frustration. The desire for more consistent leadership presence, authentic engagement, and greater operational empathy was a recurring theme.

A further source of dissatisfaction was the limited formal recognition for high performance. Beyond Performance Enhancement Programme (PEP) allocations, veterinarians reported few structured opportunities to have their contributions acknowledged at an organisational level. This reflects wider research by Kogan et al. (2020), who highlight that regulatory veterinarians are more likely to disengage when they feel disconnected from organisational strategy and unrecognised for their efforts.

Enhancing leadership visibility and formalising recognition mechanisms is therefore essential. Visible, responsive leadership helps build trust, fosters a sense of shared purpose, and reinforces the value of frontline regulatory work. Recognition, whether through formal programmes, targeted feedback, or public acknowledgment of excellence, plays a pivotal role in maintaining morale and sustaining long-term engagement.

Many veterinarians also reflected on the challenges of managing competing expectations from external stakeholders, including operators, regulators, and the public. These demands require more than technical knowledge; they call for strong interpersonal skills, including communication, conflict resolution, and professional resilience.

For those living and working in smaller rural communities, the lines between professional and personal life can be particularly blurred. Veterinarians often interact with the same individuals in both regulatory and social settings, which can intensify interpersonal pressures, especially when managing compliance issues or conflict. This overlap adds complexity to already challenging roles, and further underscores the value of strong soft skills, resilience training, and locally tailored leadership support.

While these pressures can contribute to stress and disengagement, MPI has made a wide range of relevant soft skill development resources available via Tiritiri. These include courses on difficult conversations, building resilience, and working with challenging behaviours. However, awareness and uptake of these resources appear uneven. Some veterinarians reported not knowing these tools existed or receiving limited encouragement to access them as part of their development.

There may be an opportunity for People Managers to take a more proactive role in promoting these tools — especially for staff in rural or sole-charge roles, where informal support networks may be limited. Making use of existing development frameworks could help bridge the gap between technical capability and the interpersonal demands of regulatory veterinary work, ultimately supporting both performance and wellbeing.

Developing leadership capability at all levels, from senior managers to local team leaders and VTS1, will be fundamental to creating a more connected, resilient, and engaged veterinary workforce within VS.

6.1.1 Line Manager Capability and Development

While national leadership visibility was a common concern, veterinarians consistently emphasised the influential role played by their immediate managers in shaping their daily work experience and longer-term career satisfaction. Empathetic, technically competent, and supportive people leaders were often cited as key factors in veterinarians' decisions to stay within MPI.

These findings align with research by Whitaker et al. (2020) and Brown (2023), who identified local leadership capability as a significant determinant of engagement and retention in veterinary and regulatory settings. Effective line managers provide not only technical oversight but also pastoral support and professional validation, reinforcing a sense of value and connection to the organisation.

*"I stayed because I had a good manager and a team that supported me.
That made all the difference."*

Conversely, poor communication, inconsistent expectations, and lack of development support from local managers were identified as major contributors to dissatisfaction and attrition risk.

"If your manager's disengaged or overloaded, the whole team feels it."

In particular, the role of VTS1 emerged as an area of concern. While VTS1s are often the most senior veterinarians physically present at a site, they are not consistently recognised or empowered in a leadership capacity. Participants described situations where VTS1s were expected to oversee operational delivery but lacked the support, training, or formal tools to address issues or help colleagues effectively. This gap created ambiguity around their role, and in some cases, undermined both team cohesion and accountability at the site level.

The findings suggest that immediate managers have a disproportionate influence on veterinary satisfaction and retention. Where leadership capability is strong, veterinarians reported feeling supported, valued, and engaged. Where it is lacking, dissatisfaction was often compounded by isolation and poor communication.

6.2 Career Development and Structural Constraints

Many veterinarians surveyed or interviewed expressed a sense of "hitting a ceiling" in their careers, particularly those not pursuing formal management roles. While MPI offers stability and technical development early in employment, participants frequently described a lack of clear or appealing pathways for progression beyond the verifier (VTS2) level. This perception of limited advancement aligns with broader workforce literature, where Whitaker et al. (2020) and Brown (2023) emphasise the importance of defined career pathways and robust continuing professional development (CPD) in sustaining long-term engagement.

"Unless you want to be a manager, there's nowhere to go."

Within MPI's Verification Services, variability in access to CPD, secondments, and leadership development was raised as a recurring concern. Opportunities to engage in project work or progress into leadership positions often depend on location, team structure, and immediate managerial support. Even where formal frameworks exist, this unevenness can reinforce perceptions of stagnation and professional inequity.

Survey responses also highlighted that CPD opportunities were not always proactively offered or clearly communicated by managers, further compounding feelings of frustration. For veterinarians in isolated placements, the combination of inconsistent support and limited visibility of development pathways contributed to a diminished sense of long-term career growth.

MPI has introduced several positive initiatives, such as the Mentoring Programme, Technical Development Programme, and Leadership and Talent Identification process, aimed at supporting progression. However, awareness of and access to these initiatives remains uneven. For many veterinarians, particularly those outside major centres, these opportunities feel out of reach or disconnected from their day-to-day work.

To improve long-term satisfaction and retention, MPI will need to go beyond simply offering development programmes. It must ensure that opportunities are visible, accessible, and aligned with the diverse aspirations of its veterinary workforce—including those who wish to deepen their technical expertise without stepping into formal leadership roles.

6.2.1 Peer-Led Innovation and Role Design

Veterinarians expressed a strong desire for greater autonomy and input into shaping their day-to-day work. Many felt that despite their operational expertise, their insights were often overlooked in decision-making processes. This lack of practitioner agency was seen as a missed opportunity—both for improving efficiency and for fostering a more engaged, solutions-focused workforce.

Participants proposed several practical ways to enhance frontline involvement, including:

- Veterinarian-led calibration sessions to support technical alignment and professional development.
- Local working groups to co-design onboarding processes, regional rostering models, and site-based improvements.
- Collaborative recognition systems that highlight team-driven innovation rather than focusing solely on individual performance.

While these initiatives were well supported by peers, some were reportedly dismissed by management as falling outside the team's responsibilities, reinforcing a perception that frontline expertise is undervalued, and that meaningful innovation must be centrally driven. This response discouraged initiative and weakened trust in the organisation's willingness to embrace practitioner-led improvement.

Empowering veterinarians to contribute to local solutions (within the bounds of regulatory requirements) can improve engagement, strengthen operational relevance, and enhance professional pride. As Kogan et al. (2020) note, flattening hierarchies and increasing practitioner agency are key levers for improving satisfaction and retention in regulatory veterinary settings.

6.2.2 Barriers to Advancement: The VTS2 to VTS1 Transition

While some veterinarians expressed interest in advancing, many viewed the move from VTS2 (Verifier) to VTS1 (Supervisor) as unappealing. Several participants described the role as carrying high accountability but low authority, with limited ability to address team issues independently.

Other deterrents included:

- Increased operational pressure without corresponding support.
- Financial disincentives, where salaried VTS1 roles were seen as less rewarding than penal-rated shift work.
- Limited clarity or transparency in recruitment processes, with inconsistent feedback or support for aspiring leaders.

Even veterinarians with leadership aspirations noted that the VTS1 role often felt disconnected from their long-term goals or personal values. For some, the role added complexity without providing meaningful influence or career progression.

These findings highlight a broader disconnect between formal promotion structures and frontline experience. To build a sustainable leadership pipeline, MPI must ensure that supervisory roles are realistically scoped, visibly supported, and financially viable, and that development pathways are clearly communicated and genuinely accessible.

6.2.3 Summary

Career development within MPI VS requires more than providing nominal pathways; it must focus on making advancement genuinely desirable, supported, and accessible. Addressing

barriers to peer leadership, empowering veterinarians to shape their own environments, and ensuring transparent, well-supported progression systems will be critical to strengthening long-term retention and satisfaction

6.3 Workload, Rostering, and Retention Pressures

Rostering and leave access emerged as key stressors for veterinarians, particularly those working in Establishment roles. While daily workloads were generally described as manageable, difficulties securing planned leave, especially during peak processing periods or when vacancies existed, contributed to frustration and fatigue.

These findings reflect wider concerns identified in the literature, where Fletcher et al. (2020) and Moir & Van den Brink (2020) link inflexible scheduling and lack of relief cover to increased burnout, emotional exhaustion, and early-stage attrition in veterinary roles. Sustained pressure on veterinarians to delay or forgo leave can undermine their ability to recover, ultimately affecting both personal wellbeing and regulatory performance.

Veterinarians reported that limited relief capacity often led to declined leave requests or pressure to delay time off, impacting both personal wellbeing and team morale.

These challenges were most acute in smaller teams, where the absence of local backup constrained flexibility and placed additional burden on remaining staff. Some veterinarians described feeling that operational continuity took precedence over rest and recovery, which over time led to disengagement.

Circuit and sector-specific veterinarians reported more variable experiences. While some described professional isolation in remote roles, others felt well-supported through regional team connections and flexible scheduling. This variation suggests that local team culture, leadership responsiveness, and rostering design all influence team members experiences of work-life balance.

Although VS roles offer greater job security and reduced emotional strain compared to clinical practice, these benefits can be undermined when veterinarians lack reliable access to leave. The findings suggest that sustainable engagement is closely tied to the predictability of rostering, the availability of relief, and the ability to take time away without undue stress on colleagues or operational delivery.

6.4 Onboarding, Retention Risk, and Role Fit

As outlined in Sections 5.1.3 and 5.1.5, onboarding variability and early misalignment with the regulatory purpose of Verification Services roles significantly influence veterinarian confidence, role fit, and early retention outcomes. This section explores how strengthening onboarding, building career adaptability, and normalising public sector veterinary careers can improve workforce stability over the long term.

Internal HR data supports these observations, with informal trends indicating that a significant proportion of resignations occur within the first 12–24 months of employment, particularly in rural Establishment roles where geographic isolation and operational intensity amplify onboarding challenges.

Importantly, several veterinarians who initially left MPI later returned to the organisation in more flexible or better-aligned roles, such as casual, reliever, or Certification positions. This

reflects what Shiri et al. (2020) describe as *career adaptability*—the ability to adjust professional trajectories in response to personal, operational, or life-stage changes.

Although career adaptability is less explored in the context of regulatory veterinary roles, it is increasingly recognised in broader workforce research as a key factor in retaining skilled professionals over time (Whitaker et al., 2020; Gallup, 2020). These “boomerang” career paths suggest that veterinary retention is not always linear—and that MPI has an opportunity to better support flexible re-entry, lateral movement, and staged progression as part of a long-term workforce strategy.

Beyond onboarding and re-entry pathways, the research identifies a broader opportunity to build awareness of regulatory veterinary careers much earlier in the veterinary training pipeline. Many participants described experiencing an “identity shift” upon entering regulatory work, having previously regarded clinical practice as the default or only professional pathway. This disconnect contributed to early disillusionment for some new starters.

Future initiatives could include:

- Greater presence at veterinary conferences, student events, and online forums.
- Articles and profiles in veterinary journals highlighting the impact and professional fulfilment of regulatory work.
- Collaboration with veterinary schools to integrate public health and regulatory career pathways into curricula and career services.

By proactively educating veterinarians earlier in their training and career decision-making, MPI can strengthen recruitment pipelines, improve role fit, and reduce early-stage attrition across Verification Services.

6.5 Summary of Influencing Factors

This research identified eight interrelated factors that shape veterinarian satisfaction, engagement, and retention within MPI’s VS. These factors span organisational structures, leadership behaviours, work conditions, and career alignment—suggesting that retention is influenced by a combination of interconnected experiences rather than a single driver.

Drawing together the evidence from interviews, surveys, and internal workforce data, the key influencing factors are:

- **Leadership visibility and recognition:**
Veterinarians described a desire for more visible and operationally connected leadership at the national level. Many felt disconnected from decision-making and expressed that recognition (whether through feedback, formal acknowledgement, or inclusion in wider discussions) was limited beyond their immediate teams.
- **Line manager capability and support:**
Participants highlighted variability in the quality of managerial support, noting that skilled, approachable line managers significantly influenced morale, performance, and retention.
- **Career development and progression pathways:**
Staff identified limited advancement options beyond verifier roles, particularly for those not seeking formal management positions. Access to CPD varied significantly across regions. While initiatives like the Mentoring Programme and Technical Development Programme were in place, their visibility and uptake were inconsistent.

- **Organisational structure and practitioner agency:**
Veterinarians valued flatter, collaborative working environments but reported frustration with centralised decision-making. A lack of input into areas such as rostering, onboarding design, and professional development planning was seen to limit ownership and innovation at the frontline.
- **Rostering, leave access, and flexibility**
Veterinarians in Establishment roles reported that challenges accessing planned leave, especially during peak periods or staff shortages, were a key stressor. While the overall workload was not seen as excessive, inflexible rostering and limited relief options impacted wellbeing and morale.
- **Onboarding quality and early retention risk:**
Inconsistent onboarding experiences influenced veterinarians' early confidence and engagement. A high proportion of resignations from VS occurred within the first two years of employment. While these early exits were most frequently associated with Establishment roles, this may also reflect the larger number of veterinarians employed in Establishment compared to Circuit and specialist teams. Nonetheless, variability in mentoring, preparation, and initial support was commonly cited as contributing to early disengagement.
- **Career adaptability and re-engagement opportunities:**
Some veterinarians who left VS remained within MPI, transitioning into other roles such as Policy, or Trade work. Others later returned to VS in casual, reliever, or more flexible roles. These examples suggest that veterinary careers within MPI often follow non-linear pathways, and that internal mobility can support longer-term retention.
- **Purpose alignment and professional identity:**
Veterinarians who entered VS without a clear understanding of the regulatory nature and national purpose of the role were more likely to experience early misalignment. Participants described undergoing a shift in identity when moving from clinical to regulatory work. Greater clarity during recruitment and onboarding was seen as important to building role fit and professional satisfaction.

Summary

Retention within VS is shaped by the interaction of organisational support structures, leadership culture, career development opportunities, operational design, and veterinarians' sense of purpose. Addressing these factors through targeted, practitioner-informed strategies will be critical to strengthening MPI's veterinary workforce resilience and safeguarding New Zealand's food safety, biosecurity, and export economy.

7 Conclusions

Veterinarians in MPI's VS are essential to safeguarding New Zealand's food safety, biosecurity, and international trade. While many value the structure, purpose, and impact of regulatory work, this research highlights that engagement and retention are shaped less by individual resilience and more by how the system is designed to support success.

Eight interconnected factors emerged across interviews, surveys, and workforce data:

- The need for more visible, operationally connected leadership and structured recognition
- The importance of capable, trained, well-supported line managers
- The availability of clear, accessible career development pathways
- The value of practitioner agency within operational frameworks
- The pressures created by workload intensity and inflexible rostering
- The impact of inconsistent onboarding and early role fit
- The need for career adaptability and flexible re-engagement options
- The importance of aligning professional identity with MPI's mission from the outset

What this research ultimately suggests is that veterinary retention should not be the goal in itself. Instead, the focus must be on equipping veterinarians to thrive, providing them with the training, leadership, development opportunities, and organisational clarity to build successful, meaningful careers. When these systems are in place, veterinarians are more likely to remain engaged and less likely to leave for preventable reasons. And when they do move into other parts of MPI, they carry with them valuable institutional knowledge, relationships, and capability, strengthening the organisation as a whole.

Retention, then, is not about holding people in place. It's about ensuring MPI creates positive career experiences that build confidence, skill, and adaptability, making the organisation more resilient, connected, and prepared for future challenges.

MPI has already taken important steps, including the Mentoring Programme and Technical Development Programme. Yet visibility, consistency, and accessibility remain uneven, especially in isolated roles. Leadership development and support at the local level also remain important, particularly for VTS1s and new managers. Likewise, early attrition continues to signal the need for improved onboarding, mentoring, and realistic expectation-setting from recruitment onwards.

This project does not capture every veterinary experience, but it offers a grounded, practitioner-informed view of what is working, what needs improvement, and where MPI can focus its efforts to future-proof its veterinary workforce.

Future strategies should also extend to the experiences of those who have exited, ensuring that MPI's approach is inclusive, data-informed, and reflective of the full veterinary lifecycle. Retention is not just a workforce metric, it is a marker of how well an organisation prepares, supports, and values its people.

Looking Ahead

If MPI invests in building a positive, connected, and future-focused experience for veterinarians:

- New starters will benefit from structured onboarding, tailored mentoring, and leaders who understand the realities of operational work.
- Career development will be supported with visible, transparent progression options across technical and leadership tracks.
- Workloads will be more sustainable, enabled by relief planning, flexible rostering, and realistic service delivery expectations.
- Teams will have the agency to shape local solutions, supported by national systems that foster—not stifle—innovation.
- Managers will be equipped with the tools and training to lead effectively and compassionately.
- Leadership visibility and regional engagement will rebuild trust and foster a sense of belonging.

This isn't about reinventing the system. It's about refining what already exists, filling known gaps, and ensuring MPI remains a place where veterinarians not only stay—but thrive, grow, and contribute meaningfully across their careers.

8 Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to support MPI in strengthening veterinary retention and satisfaction within VS. They are based on qualitative insights, HR data, and alignment with best practices in veterinary and public sector workforce development.

8.1 Organisational Strategies for MPI

1. Reinstate Structured Onboarding and Mentorship

A consistent, nationally delivered onboarding programme should be reintroduced for all new team members. This should include:

- In-person induction tailored to VS roles
- A structured mentorship period (6–12 months), especially for those in sole-charge or rural placements

This approach not only builds early confidence and reduces isolation, but also ensures that messaging about the role, expectations, and the operational reality are consistent across the country. Clear, aligned onboarding helps new veterinarians understand what the job involves and how it connects to MPI's broader mission - reducing early attrition and improving long-term engagement.

Additionally, MPI should explore options to support flexible re-entry into VS, such as reliever or part-time roles. Several veterinarians have returned to MPI after a period away, often into roles that better align with life stage or career goals. Embedding flexibility into the onboarding and workforce planning framework will help retain institutional knowledge and strengthen long-term capability.

2. Develop Transparent Career Pathways

Veterinarians need to see a future for themselves within MPI. Career development should be visible, supported, and consistent across the organisation. MPI should:

- Publish clear pathways to roles such as Team Manager, Team Leader, and specialist positions in food safety, biosecurity, and certification.
- Promote secondments, project roles, and cross-functional opportunities as valid and supported development options.
- Share real examples of veterinarians who have progressed internally—for example, one veterinarian who moved from an Establishment role to Team Manager after leading a national project, another who transitioned into a Certification role following a secondment focused on export documentation systems, and others who have moved from VS into policy, trade, or biosecurity roles across MPI

Career development should not be limited to staying within VS. In fact, movement from VS into other parts of MPI is a strategic opportunity - it allows veterinarians to bring frontline insight into broader decision-making processes. This helps ensure that decisions made in policy, trade, or operational areas are informed by the realities of regulatory work, reducing siloed thinking and improving outcomes across the Ministry.

MPI should also create more opportunities for frontline veterinarians to contribute to technical project work, which builds informal leadership, deepens technical capability, and prepares staff for future roles.

Supporting both formal and informal development ensures that veterinarians can grow their careers in ways that align with their strengths and interests - while also building MPI's future leadership and technical capability from within.

3. **Improve Access to CPD**

CPD is essential for maintaining confidence, technical capability, and long-term job satisfaction. However, access to CPD across VS remains inconsistent. Some veterinarians report strong support, while others struggle to access even basic development opportunities.

This is less about funding and more about awareness, prioritisation, and consistency. MPI should:

- Ensure People Managers are well-informed about CPD opportunities and actively promote them during onboarding, team meetings, and performance conversations.
- Increase the visibility and use of MPI's internal learning platform, Tiritiri, which provides technical, leadership, and soft skill development resources. Awareness and uptake vary across regions — improving consistency will help reduce inequity and strengthen team capability.
- Calibrate expectations across regions to ensure CPD is applied fairly, avoiding situations where some staff access multiple opportunities while others miss out entirely.
- Showcase examples of CPD activities that veterinarians have undertaken (both MPI-funded and through the Professional Verifiers Institute (PVI)) to raise awareness and inspire others.
- Treat soft skills such as communication, conflict resolution, adaptability, and emotional resilience as core development needs. These competencies directly support veterinarians in managing operator relationships, navigating compliance responsibilities, and sustaining wellbeing in high-pressure environments.

Creating a culture where CPD is visible, encouraged, and equitably supported will help build a confident, resilient, and future-focused veterinary workforce.

4. **Enhance Recognition and Feedback Systems**

Improve the quality and consistency of performance conversations by strengthening MPI's use of the Performance and Engagement Plan (PEP) framework. Veterinarians consistently reported that poorly structured or superficial PEPs reduce motivation and trust in the system.

- Managers to follow a clear, structured framework linked to KPIs
- Managers should be trained to deliver effective PEPs.
- PEPs should be more than a compliance exercise: They should be used to recognise contributions, identify development opportunities early, align personal goals with MPI's mission, and build trust and engagement.

When done well, PEPs are a powerful tool for retention. They help veterinarians feel seen, supported, and motivated to grow within MPI. When done poorly, they become a missed opportunity—or worse, a reason to leave.

5. **Improve Relief Cover and Workforce Planning**

Strengthen regional relief capacity and workforce planning to ensure veterinarians can

access leave, participate in professional development, and maintain wellbeing without service delivery being compromised.

Key actions include:

- Proactively identify high-pressure periods and allocate strategic backfilling resources to prevent rostering gaps that overload small teams.
- Work collaboratively with key operators. Engage with plant operators in advance to plan shift patterns and staffing requirements for the coming months. This proactive coordination helps ensure adequate coverage and reduces last-minute rostering pressure.
- Strengthen relief pool systems to ensure regional resilience. Relief should be planned, not reactive.
- Delegate appropriate tasks to frontline supervisors or senior team members where feasible, such as managing routine tasks, facilitating calibration meetings, or supporting onboarding activities. This approach, already used successfully in areas like Certification and Circuit, reduces bottlenecks for Team Managers and empowers experienced team members.
- Train Team Managers and Team Leaders to better identify signs of fatigue and roster-related stress within their teams, and to act early to support staff wellbeing.

Sustainable staffing is not just about numbers, it is about ensuring staff have the capacity to work safely, maintain professional standards, and engage meaningfully with their teams and operators. Fatigue and burnout, if left unaddressed, directly undermine MPI's regulatory objectives and risk long-term workforce stability.

Investing in proactive relief planning and building stronger, more supportive local team structures will strengthen resilience, reduce preventable attrition, and protect both animal welfare and public health outcomes.

6. Strengthen Leadership Visibility and Cultural Competency

Increase the visibility, approachability, and operational understanding of MPI's leadership at all levels, while building frontline manager capability to support veterinary wellbeing and career development.

Key actions include:

- Engage directly with frontline teams. National and regional leaders should regularly visit sites, attend regional forums, and participate in informal check-ins - not just during audits. Purposeful leadership visibility helps bridge the disconnect between Wellington-based strategy and site-level realities.
- Equip all People Leaders with the right training. This includes Team Managers, Team Leaders, and VTS1s. All should receive dedicated leadership training covering emotional intelligence, practical communication, conflict management, pastoral care, and stress recognition. This training should be mandatory for all new People Leaders and refreshed regularly.
- Empower VTS1 to lead. VTS1s are often seen as having limited authority, despite holding formal delegations. They operate at the same level as Team Leaders in Circuit, Live Animal, and Certification, with responsibilities that could include hiring, performance management, leave approval, rostering, and team-specific tasks. MPI must ensure VTS1s are empowered and supported to carry out these responsibilities confidently and consistently. Doing so will:

1. Improve local leadership responsiveness
 2. Reduce bottlenecks
 3. Alleviate pressure on Team Managers in Establishment roles, allowing them to focus on broader people leadership
- Support early intervention on wellbeing. People Leaders should be trained to recognise early signs of fatigue, disengagement, and burnout - particularly in isolated roles like Establishment. They should feel confident initiating supportive conversations and connecting staff to MPI's wellbeing resources, including EAP.
 - Strengthen exit feedback system. Exit interviews and surveys should be routine, role-specific, and analysed for actionable trends. This feedback loop is essential for identifying systemic issues and improving retention strategies.

Improving leadership visibility and frontline capability is critical to reducing early attrition, enhancing engagement, and building a culture where veterinarians feel seen, valued, and supported, not only in moments of crisis.

Strong, responsive leadership at all levels is essential to safeguarding both regulatory outcomes and veterinary workforce resilience.

As part of this, MPI should ensure that recruitment and promotion processes are transparent, supportive, and development-focused. Veterinarians applying for internal roles should receive clear, timely feedback that builds confidence and helps them grow, even if unsuccessful.

Similarly, exit interviews and surveys must be routine and role-specific, capturing both satisfaction and departure drivers. This feedback should be analysed regularly to inform workforce strategies and address emerging issues early.

7. **Empower Peer-Led Innovation and Local Ownership**

Support staff to lead practical improvements in their own work environments and create more consistent opportunities to share knowledge across VS.

Team members consistently expressed a desire to improve how things work on the ground—whether it's rostering, onboarding, or wellbeing. Many also highlighted the need for better ways to share technical insights, learn from peers, and stay aligned across regions.

Key actions include:

- Encourage staff to take ownership of operational improvements within their teams, such as refining shift patterns, improving onboarding, or trialling new approaches to calibration and team support.
- Allow regional teams to propose and test small-scale changes without requiring national approval for every step, including initiatives like rostering flexibility, wellbeing improvements, or peer-led training sessions.
- Clearly define what decisions can be made at the regional or team level—particularly for non-regulatory matters—to empower staff to act within their scope and reduce unnecessary escalation.
- Establish regular peer-led calibration sessions and discussion forums where team members can share technical insights, troubleshoot challenges, and align on best practices, with support from management but driven by practitioners.

- Provide light-touch support for innovation by offering practical help such as time, coordination assistance, or a point of contact to help teams implement and share successful ideas without over-formalising the process.

8. **Explore Alternatives to Full-Time On-Site Veterinary Presence**

Establish a cross-functional working group - including team members, people and operational leaders, and wider MPI staff - to assess whether the current requirement for full-time on-site veterinary presence can be reduced or redesigned without compromising compliance or market access.

The current model of permanent on-site veterinary presence, particularly in Establishment roles, contributes significantly to:

- Rostering pressure and limited leave flexibility
- High demand for relief cover
- Professional isolation and reduced access to development opportunities
- Burnout and early attrition

Veterinarians have expressed a strong desire for more flexibility and the ability to work off-site or in hybrid roles where appropriate. Other MPI teams (e.g. Certification, Circuit, Biosecurity) already operate with more flexible staffing models.

Key actions:

- Form a working group with representation from VS, Bilateral Relations and Trade, Legal, and Operational Policy teams to:
 - Review current regulatory and market access requirements
 - Identify where flexibility already exists but is not being used
 - Explore alternative models (e.g. once-per-shift presence, remote verification, or shared site coverage)
- Pilot alternative staffing models in selected regions or sites to test feasibility, compliance, and operational impact.
- Engage with key export market stakeholders to understand where negotiation or clarification may be possible to support more flexible veterinary deployment.

9. **Strengthen Early Purpose Alignment and Expectation Setting**

Increase visibility of VS careers earlier in the veterinary pipeline by engaging with veterinary schools, student associations, conferences, and professional journals. Introduce guest lectures, case studies, and internship opportunities to normalise regulatory work as a valued veterinary pathway.

During recruitment, ensure job advertisements and interview processes clearly outline the realities of VS roles — including shift work, regulatory compliance responsibilities, travel, and the public health mandate.

Strengthen onboarding content to connect veterinarians' day-to-day work with MPI's broader mission, reinforcing the critical role VS plays in protecting food safety, animal welfare, and New Zealand's export economy. This could include developing a short "Day in the Life" video or resource that showcases different roles within VS

(Establishment, Circuit, Certification). This helps normalise the identity shift from clinical to regulatory work and provides a realistic, values-driven preview of the job.

Early and transparent communication about the nature and purpose of the work can help set realistic expectations, strengthen professional identity, reduce early attrition, and foster stronger long-term engagement.

10. Align Remuneration and Responsibility for VTS1 Roles

MPI should address two interconnected challenges affecting veterinary retention and progression: (1) the internal pay imbalance where VTS2s may out-earn VTS1s, and (2) the lack of clear, accessible information about how MPI veterinary salaries compare with external industry benchmarks.

Currently, some VTS2s receive higher total remuneration than VTS1s due to shift penalties and overtime, despite VTS1s carrying greater responsibility. This discourages progression into leadership roles. At the same time, veterinarians report limited visibility into how MPI pay compares with private sector or industry roles, which can fuel hearsay and disengagement.

Key actions include:

- Clarify and standardise the VTS1 role to consistently include people leadership responsibilities (e.g. performance management, rostering, leave approval, staff support), positioning it as a genuine leadership step.
- Support VTS1s to lead effectively by delegating appropriate authority, providing targeted leadership training, and ensuring team structures allow them to deliver on these responsibilities.
- Review remuneration alignment between VTS2 and VTS1 roles. Ensure that where additional responsibilities are expected, they are reflected in salary and benefits — avoiding situations where leadership roles are financially disadvantaged.
- Develop transparent internal guidance that clearly outlines how pay is calculated across veterinary roles, including the impact of shift allowances, overtime, and salaried banding, to help staff make informed decisions about career progression.
- Provide comparative salary data showing how MPI veterinary remuneration aligns with industry benchmarks (e.g. NZVA surveys, Strategic Pay reports), and update this regularly. Make this available through MPI's HR channels or team conversations.
- Include remuneration as a topic in performance and development planning, especially for staff considering leadership roles or seeking to understand their long-term earning potential.

Rationale:

Veterinarians are more likely to pursue leadership or stay within MPI when they understand the value of their role both in terms of pay and professional growth. Ensuring VTS1 positions are recognised, supported, and financially viable, and that MPI's overall veterinary pay structure is transparently communicated, will reduce misinformation, improve trust, and support sustainable career pathways.

8.2 Self-Empowerment Strategies for MPI Veterinarians

While organisational change is essential, veterinarians also play a powerful role in shaping their own career satisfaction, wellbeing, and impact. The following strategies are designed to support veterinarians in taking ownership of their professional journey within MPI.

1. **Build and Engage in Peer Support Networks**

Connection is critical, especially in shift-based or sole-charge roles. Veterinarians are encouraged to participate in both formal and informal support networks.

These include:

- The MPI Mentoring Programme, open to staff across the Ministry
- The VS Mentoring Programme, currently focused on supporting new veterinarians in Establishment roles
- Broader networks such as the Government Women's Network, Manatū Ahu Matua employee network groups, and various social, professional, sports, and special interest groups

These networks foster collaboration, reduce isolation, and create a sense of shared purpose. Participation in mentoring (whether as a mentee or mentor) can provide valuable guidance, encouragement, and professional growth.

2. **Take Ownership of Professional Development**

Veterinarians are encouraged to proactively identify secondment, project, or CPD opportunities that align with their career goals. Rather than waiting for opportunities to be offered, those who thrive often seek them out.

MPI offers a wide range of development resources, including:

- Tiritiri, MPI's internal learning platform, which hosts a variety of courses covering technical, leadership, and soft skill development.
- Study assistance for formal education related to work (subject to approval), supporting veterinarians pursuing qualifications that enhance their role or future career pathways.
- Professional Verifiers Institute funding (for members), which can be used for personal or professional development outside of direct work responsibilities - examples include courses in sign language, business, or beekeeping.

Veterinarians are encouraged to use performance planning conversations to discuss aspirations and request tailored support. Resources available through MPI and the Professional Verifiers Institute (PVI), such as funded workshops, webinars, and networking events, can also be powerful tools for growth when fully utilised.

3. **Stay Open to Leadership Opportunities:**

Leadership roles, such as VTS1, offer opportunities for broader influence, skill development, and professional impact. While these roles come with Team new challenges, they also provide a platform to shape team culture and contribute to organisational improvement.

Veterinarians are encouraged to approach leadership with curiosity and a willingness to grow, recognising that leadership is a skill that develops over time.

4. **Use Feedback Channels Effectively**

Constructive feedback is essential to improving systems. Veterinarians are encouraged to actively participate in surveys, staff meetings, and performance reviews. These channels provide formal mechanisms for influencing change and ensuring that frontline perspectives are heard.

Meaningful change cannot be expected without engagement in the processes designed to capture staff voices. Expressing dissatisfaction without constructive participation limits the likelihood of concerns being addressed—change begins with informed, solution-focused input from those doing the work.

By engaging in these processes, veterinarians contribute to a more responsive, transparent, and supportive work environment.

5. **Prioritise Wellbeing**

Wellbeing is a professional necessity in all roles. Veterinarians are encouraged to make use of MPI's wellbeing and Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) services proactively. Setting boundaries, taking breaks, and protecting time off are essential practices for sustainable performance.

By prioritising wellbeing, veterinarians not only support their own resilience but also contribute to a healthier, more sustainable team culture.

6. **Contribute to Positive Team Culture**

Veterinarians play a key role in shaping team culture through everyday actions. Positive culture is built on shared values, mutual respect, and a willingness to support one another whether through celebrating wins, offering help, or creating space for open, respectful dialogue.

For those working sole shifts or in isolated roles, maintaining connection is especially important. Reaching out to colleagues, joining virtual catchups, or simply picking up the phone can help reduce isolation and foster belonging.

Importantly, leadership is not limited to formal roles. It is demonstrated through small, consistent actions, encouraging a teammate, sharing knowledge, or setting a positive tone during a tough shift. These behaviours strengthen morale, trust, and resilience across the team.

A strong team culture improves daily experience and supports retention, onboarding, and wellbeing, especially during periods of high demand.

9 Final Reflections

Undertaking this research has deepened my understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing veterinarians within regulatory services. It has also reinforced how strongly leadership, organisational culture, and system design shape the daily experiences of staff, and, ultimately, the sustainability of the workforce.

While the focus was on veterinarians within MPI's VS, the themes that emerged (such as onboarding, development, recognition, empowerment, and workload management) are universal. These are not just veterinary issues; they are leadership issues, relevant across many technical and regulatory environments.

One of the clearest insights was that leadership exists at every level. It's reflected in the systems that support staff, the culture teams create, and the informal support veterinarians offer one another every day. Leadership is not confined to those with formal titles - it is often found in moments of encouragement, accountability, and shared effort that build trust and cohesion over time.

This project reaffirmed that improving retention is not only about organisational design, it's about valuing people, enabling their growth, and building environments where professional purpose can thrive.

I am deeply grateful to those who shared their experiences, perspectives, and ideas to inform this project. Your valuable perspectives have provided the foundation for recommendations that aim to create meaningful and sustainable improvements within MPI's veterinary workforce.

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11 Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

1. Career Satisfaction & Job Satisfaction

- 1.1. What do you enjoy most about working at MPI?
- 1.2. What aspects of your current role do you find the most challenging?
- 1.3. How do you feel about the support you receive from management and colleagues?
- 1.4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your current work-life balance?
What could be improved?
- 1.5. Do you feel that your contributions are recognized and valued? Why or why not?
- 1.6. What aspects of your job do you find most rewarding?
- 1.7. How do you feel about the variety of work you're able to do within MPI? Do you feel it aligns with your professional interests and goals?

2. Professional Development

- 2.1. Do you feel that you have adequate opportunities for professional growth and development within MPI?
- 2.2. What kind of professional development opportunities (e.g., training, workshops, mentorship) would help you advance your career?
- 2.3. Have you participated in any formal training or development programs while working at MPI? How effective were they in helping you with your career?
- 2.4. What do you feel would make MPI a more attractive place for veterinarians looking to grow professionally?
- 2.5. Do you feel that MPI provides sufficient support for your continuing education and skill enhancement?
- 2.6. Would you consider taking on more leadership responsibilities in the future? What would make you more likely to pursue such opportunities?

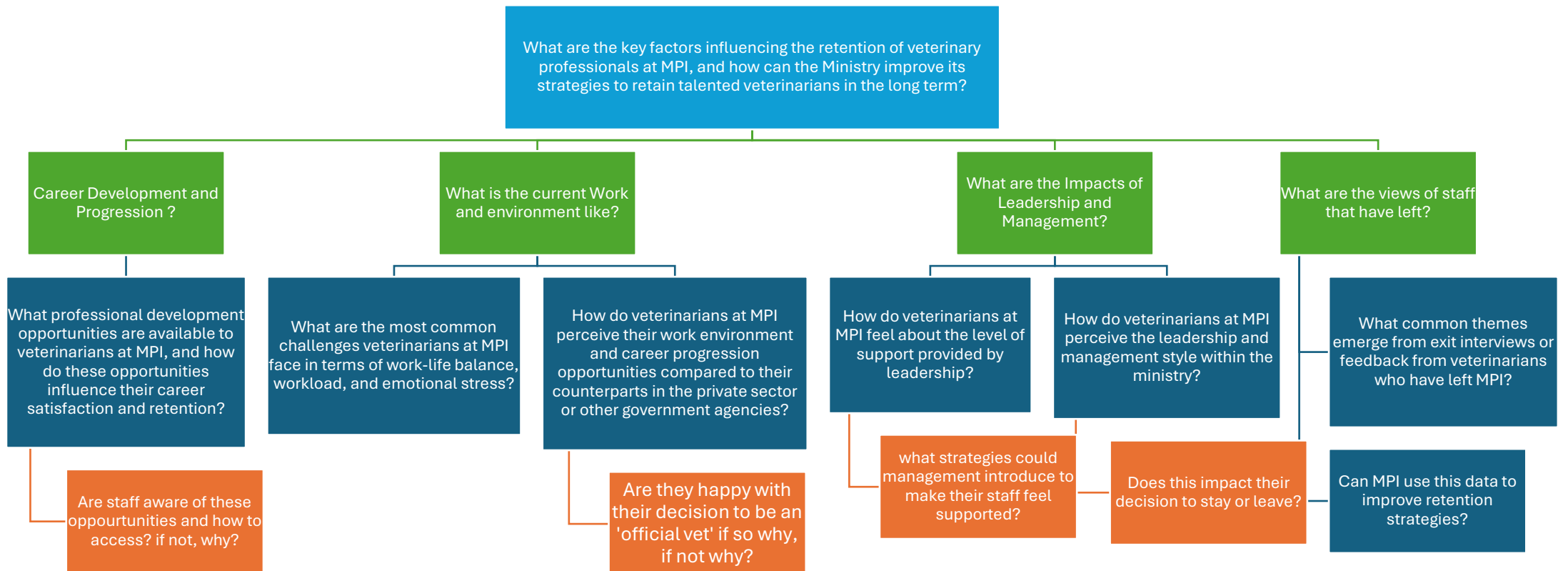
3. Leadership & Career Progression

- 3.1. Do you feel there are clear pathways for career advancement at MPI? If not, what would make those pathways clearer?
- 3.2. How do you view the current leadership and management style within your team?
What could be improved?
- 3.3. What kind of leadership opportunities would you like to see available to you in the future?
- 3.4. How can MPI better support veterinarians in transitioning into leadership or management roles?
- 3.5. What additional support or guidance do you feel would help you grow as a leader or mentor within MPI?

4. Retention & Well-being

- 4.1. What factors would make you more likely to stay at MPI long-term?
- 4.2. What do you feel might cause you to leave MPI, and how could the organization address these factors?
- 4.3. Do you feel that MPI offers sufficient flexibility and support for your personal well-being?
- 4.4. Have you ever considered leaving your role, and if so, what would have made you stay?
- 4.5. What changes would improve your overall job satisfaction and sense of career fulfilment at MPI?

Appendix 2: Question Tree



Appendix 3: HR Data Summary

Turnover Rates: MPI vs VTS 1 and 2 roles

As of 30 June	MPI Turnover	VTS 1 and 2 Turnover
2020	13%	5%
2021	11%	11%
2022	17%	9%
2023	22%	8%
2024	15%	7%

VS Only: Reasons for Leaving MPI (2020-2024)

Resignation: 72%

Retirement: 25%

Death: 2%

Dismissal: 2%

Reason	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Resigned	5	7	11	9	9
Retired	1	9	1	2	1
Dismissal	1	0	0	0	0
Death	0	0	1	0	0

Breakdown of Turnover by Sector (Past 5 Years)

Establishment Roles: 82% of leavers

Circuit Roles: 12% of leavers

Agency Technical Roles: 5% of leavers

Recruitment and Time to Fill Data (includes internal movement)

Year	New Hires	Average Time to Fill (All MPI)	Average Time to Fill (VS Only)
2022	1,749	55 days	70 days
2023	1,335	67 days	96 days
2024	944	50 days	105 days

Subsector-specific for Establishment vs Other VS

Sector	Average Time to Fill 2022	Average Time to Fill 2023	Average Time to Fill 2024
Establishments	81 days (64 adj.)	124 days (84 adj.)	116 days (86 adj.)
Other VS Roles	56 days	47 days	68 days