



The Voices of Regional Victoria

VCOSS Regional Roundtables Report
November 2018

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.



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VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays its respects to past, present and emerging Elders.

This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.



Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction: Hearing regional voices | 2 |
| Executive Summary: Victoria's regional challenges | 3 |
| La Trobe Valley and inner Gippsland | 5 |
| Bairnsdale and East Gippsland | 8 |
| Geelong and Barwon | 10 |
| Ballarat and the central highlands | 13 |
| Warrnambool and the south-west | 16 |
| Horsham and the Wimmera | 19 |
| Shepparton and the Goulburn valley | 22 |
| Wodonga and the north-east..... | 26 |
| Bendigo and central Victoria | 29 |
| Mildura and the Mallee..... | 33 |
| Appendix: Consulting regional communities..... | 35 |

Introduction: Hearing regional voices

Regional Victorians have the same stake in our democracy as people living in Melbourne. Their needs require the same recognition and respect, and their voices should not be diluted or ignored based on their distance from the corridors of power.

This report outlines the diverse voices of regional Victorian community organisations and leaders. It provides no single viewpoint from “regional Victoria.” Rather, it shows communities outside Melbourne are diverse and complex: as different from one another as they are from the city.

To compile this report, VCOSS undertook 10 regional roundtable discussions with community organisations in different parts of Victoria. We did this to recognise many solutions to social issues in Victoria’s regions already exist – but are not sought out or listened to. By bringing together diverse community organisations from the same place, in that place, they could identify the unique challenges faced by regional communities, and gain insight into their solutions.

As we approach a Victorian election, this report is a testament to the on-the-ground wisdom found in regional communities. It shows among common community themes, every issue unfolds in a unique way in different places, reflecting their history, character and resources.

This report is a foundation to walk alongside regional communities to amplify their voices and support their efforts in having their needs heard.

Executive Summary:

Victoria's regional challenges

Victoria's regional communities share many challenges with Melbourne. Despite their rich diversity and unique character, some universal themes and issues do emerge. Regional Victorians must find homes, stay safe and healthy, find work and get educated, travel around, and pay for the basics.

Finding a place to call home

Regional communities are crying out for more social housing.

Many people with low incomes cannot afford housing in regional Victoria. Tourist and seasonal workers compete for available homes, pushing people from regional centres into smaller rural communities in search of affordable housing. They can find themselves with fewer job prospects, transport options and support services.

Everyone needs a safe and secure home but a chronic social housing shortage in regional communities prevents people from being securely housed. Communities want action to create more social and affordable rental housing in Victoria's regions.

Staying safe and healthy

People in regional and rural areas have more difficulty accessing healthcare than in Melbourne. People struggle to find bulk-billing general practitioners and face long waits for specialists. Clinical mental health and alcohol and drug treatment services are scarce, especially for residential rehabilitation.

People face food insecurity in many communities, being unable to access affordable, fresh and healthy food.

Regional communities acknowledge the Royal Commission into Family Violence has made great strides. But women and children escaping violence in regional communities need more services, especially to address perpetrator behaviour. They also need primary prevention services, including programs in local schools, sporting clubs and community groups.

Getting around

Transport links between regional centres and Melbourne dominate public discussion, diverting attention from other transport needs, including local services and links to smaller localities.

People wanted better public transport within and between regions, and between regional centres and smaller towns. Limited public transport services outside of peak hours and on weekends prevent people without private transport to find work, get education and attend appointment.

Affording the basics

High energy costs, out-of-pocket health costs, petrol and childcare expenses are straining rural and regional family budgets.

Internet services and mobile reception connects rural and regional Victorians, helping them manage money, find health and other service information, and even attend remote appointments. But high costs and poor service in regional areas exacerbates “the digital divide.”

Getting a good education and job

Many regions have vulnerable young people disengaging from school, including students with disability. Schools can better engage young people by identifying future employment paths, using flexible learning models and mentoring programs. Schools can also better integrate support services, such as youth workers and mental health support.

High quality vocational education can boost regional Victorians’ job prospects. Rebuilding TAFE’s reputation, and forging better connections with schools and community services, can help more people find good, secure jobs.

Giving children a great start

Because of a lack of early intervention services, children in regional Victoria are betrayed when government funded programs wait until families reach crisis point to intervene. Removing children from families often adds to their trauma, and rarely leads to a positive life trajectory.

Early intervention services can help families learn to nurture their children, long before involving child protection. These services include early parenting support and perinatal services. In particular, regional organisations believe Aboriginal organisations should be appropriately funded to deliver high quality and targeted support to Aboriginal families.

Embracing resilience and vibrancy

We can help build strong communities with place-based solutions that empower people and provide flexibility to community service organisations. Local organisations are best positioned to identify and respond to local priorities.

Community organisations are powerful regional job creators. However, job quality is undermined by short-term or insecure contracts. Longer-term, properly funded agreements, allowing for good wages and conditions, can help make the community sector an “industry of choice” and support strong regional job opportunities.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) rollout is well underway in some Victorian regions. Regional organisations found the city-centric NDIS model had flaws in regional communities, including risks of market failure, services providers being unavailable, lack of choice, and shortages of high quality, well-trained workers.

La Trobe Valley and inner Gippsland

Priorities

- Increase social housing in inner Gippsland
- Create and enforce minimum standards for rental properties
- Integrate and embed other services with housing support in inner Gippsland
- Fund multidisciplinary teams that are integrated and respond holistically to people's needs
- Increase funding to the Indigenous Tenants at Risk Program (ITAR) and culturally appropriate legal services
- Ensure students can enrol in all free TAFE courses at their local campus
- Help young people get a driver's license
- Decentralise government services in the regions
- Expand availability of parenting support programs
- Improve access to interpreting services
- Assist organisations develop culturally appropriate services
- Reduce wait times for individual support programs (Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) and mental health) to reduce impact on families
- Establish a youth hub for young people disengaged from education and employment

Pressure on inner Gippsland housing

People in the La Trobe Valley and inner Gippsland need affordable rental housing. Melbourne's growth has put pressure on nearby communities, with many people moving to regional communities in search of cheaper housing, especially along the Gippsland rail line and Bass Coast. This increasing housing demand squeezes local supply, driving up house prices and rents. People living on low-incomes, especially Newstart, can't find anywhere decent to live.

In turn, this has put pressure on social housing and homelessness services. Already limited emergency accommodation is being squeezed, with people unable to enter social housing or find affordable rental homes.

Even when people can find rental homes, problems remain. Rising rents in inner Gippsland make paying rent more difficult, leading to conflicts over rent arrears. Similarly, low vacancy rates reduce pressure on landlords to maintain properties, causing maintenance disputes. Few legal assistance services are available to manage demand for tenancy support and advice.

Many homes in inner Gippsland are ageing, often translating to poor quality rental housing, reinforced by the lack of enforceable minimum standards for rental homes. Too many people are living in substandard, inadequate housing like boarding houses. Limited transport, and scarce and

scattered services (including culturally appropriate ones) exclude the most marginalised people from accessing housing support.

People cannot overcome problems causing underlying housing insecurity and homelessness because other services are overstretched and fail to link together. Secondary support services have long waiting lists, such as AOD, gambling and financial counselling services. Embedding legal services with housing services has been very successful, and can be further replicated.

Creating jobs and skilling workers in inner Gippsland

Exclusively focusing on electricity and mining sector changes frustrates regional organisations from the La Trobe Valley and inner Gippsland. Their economy is more diverse, and their challenges more extensive. Shrinking electricity and mining jobs are not the only cause of unemployment. The employment challenge is more complex and varies in different places.

Meagre public transport limits participation in work and education. Public transport often doesn't serve employment centres or training opportunities, and may not be timed to coincide with work and learning hours. People rely on cars, and young people struggle to get a license.

Local organisations welcome newly announced free TAFE courses starting in 2019. But they point out not all courses are offered at all campuses, and potential students cannot always enroll in chosen courses at their local campus. People asked for enough funding flexibility for small regional classes to be viable, such as rural loadings.

Decentralising government functions can enhance employment in the region, as the NDIS call centre in Newborough attests.¹

Giving children the best start

Too many children in inner Gippsland are “falling through the cracks”. Overstretched community services and schools mean children and young people cannot get the attention and help they need.

Families are increasingly isolated from the community and from services, particularly people living on farms. Digital disadvantage increases isolation. Inner Gippsland organisations felt appropriate parenting support programs were not available. Services can only respond when families are already in crisis. Early intervention responses must be funded.

The inner Gippsland region lacks enough kindergarten services, compounded by access barriers such as costs and transport. Similarly, increasingly large schools and class sizes mean teachers have little time to identify and respond to children at risk. Children needing extra support cannot access learning aids and other supports in school. Inner Gippsland organisations suggested disengagement from secondary school and youth unemployment was an increasing problem. They believe schools have no incentive to keep children engaged, and are not working collaboratively.

¹ Latrobe Valley Express, [NDIS call centre jobs announced](#), 23 October 2018

Young homeless people in inner Gippsland, or those leaving care, need extra support to stay in education or training. They need accommodation linked to education, training and other support services.

Embracing resilience and inclusion

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in inner Gippsland tend to be small, and include temporary migrant workers. Organisations struggle to access and afford appropriate interpreters. While telephone interpreters can be used, this is not always appropriate.

Not all service providers are culturally appropriate and safe for Aboriginal people. The same applies for people from CALD backgrounds. Community service workers need more training and development to support Aboriginal and migrant communities. “Mainstream” services and Aboriginal community controlled organisations can form better partnerships.

Some local organisations suggest community services need diversity plans. One option is for the Victorian Government to fund diversity advisors to assist organisations develop these plans. Further, organisations need access to culturally appropriate services to refer clients.

The NDIS rollout worried organisations from the La Trobe Valley inner Gippsland. The NDIA has not assured them people with NDIS packages will be able to live independently. They also questioned whether people without packages will receive enough help once block-funded services are ceased, especially people with psychosocial disabilities.

Bairnsdale and East Gippsland

Priorities

- Increase social and affordable housing in areas close to services, employment opportunities and transport
- Improve public transport: frequency, additional routes and more targeted timetabling
- Fund the development of a Food Hub in East Gippsland
- Ensure Aboriginal cultural activities are recognised as part of the education experience
- Develop a genuine regional university with a broad range of study options and support innovative ways of delivering higher education to the region
- Fund a mental health service in East Gippsland at the local hospital
- Increase availability of suicide prevention training
- Support the Children's Wellbeing Initiative

Unaffordable housing in East Gippsland

People on low wages or Centrelink benefits cannot find affordable rental housing. This is worse in larger towns such as Bairnsdale and Sale, where housing has access to V/Line train stations.

Public housing in East Gippsland has long waiting lists. Local organisations placed a high priority on developing more social housing, especially close to public transport and other facilities. They wanted to 'salt-and-pepper' social housing among private homes.

East Gippsland organisations identified particular housing needs for single people, mental health consumers, and young people. Homelessness in East Gippsland is often hidden, with many people couch-surfing or living in overcrowded homes.

Staying safe and healthy

East Gippsland has no clinical mental health service. Instead, services are based in Traralgon, with staff traveling to Bairnsdale when needed. Local organisations felt mental health funding was subsumed in larger health budgets, and too often overlooked.

Beyond specialist mental health workers, workers supporting people with mental illness need training. For example, police need more mental health training, as they are often the first responders to a mental health crisis. More generally, workers need training in suicide prevention.

Disasters can lead to long-term mental health problems. People who experience a disaster need extended support.

Connecting East Gippsland

People in East Gippsland struggle to get around without a car. The region needs more frequent and accessible V/Line train services to Bairnsdale. Local organisations also wanted more local public transport services, especially during peak times. Improving access to employment, education and services requires new, innovative transport services, suitable for regional areas. East Gippsland organisations supported reviewing community transport regulations and options.

Some people in East Gippsland experience food insecurity and cannot access fresh, healthy food. Local organisations think placing a Food Hub in East Gippsland can help.

Genuine regional education and jobs

A large cohort of mature-age university students lives in the East Gippsland region. They started university later in life to get better jobs, not graduating directly from school. They need support to complete their education. East Gippsland organisations wanted to develop genuine regional universities, offering a breadth of opportunities, and devising innovative ways of delivering higher education.

Social enterprises can increase employment and provide supportive work experience. Social enterprises need assistance to develop and be successful, particularly around business planning.

Giving children a great start

East Gippsland organisations think the Children's Wellbeing Initiative is a proactive and successful way to improve outcomes for local children. It is a community-led approach to child wellbeing run by Save the Children, bringing together different organisations supporting children and their families. Together, they strengthen and build collaborative responses for children so they can grow up safe, happy and healthy.

East Gippsland organisations report a foster carer shortage. Also, Aboriginal children and young people need more kinship carers.

East Gippsland schools can experience high absenteeism, with diverse causes. Improving school attendance needs a comprehensive response, including actively engaging young people with expanded universal services.

Geelong and Barwon

Priorities

- Require social housing to be included in all new developments in Barwon
- Build infrastructure (including childcare facilities, social housing, public transport and schools) to match anticipated population growth
- Deliver more frequent local transport services on the Bellarine peninsula
- Fund a Mental Health and Police Response partnership in the Barwon region
- Invest in regional mentoring for young people at risk of long-term unemployment
- Invest in parenting programs and support for vulnerable families
- Extend Barwon libraries opening hours, as safe spaces in the community

Booming population causing service and housing shortages

Geelong and Barwon expect significant population growth over the coming decades. But local service growth is not matching this population boom, including for childcare, public transport and schools.

People moving from Melbourne to the Barwon region puts pressure on rents, driving local people further from services and regional centres in search of cheaper housing. Barwon region organisations strongly support an inclusionary zoning requirement to include social housing in all new developments.

The Barwon region has very little social housing stock. Local organisations wanted more social housing, close to services, employment and transport. It should include different sized options, to suit both individuals and families. Different people need diverse options, including crisis housing, transitional housing and student accommodation.

Some parts of the Barwon region are popular holiday and weekend destinations. This means many local homes are vacant for much of the year. This frustrates some local community organisations, seeing largely empty properties which have potential as short-term accommodation for people in need. Some local organisations suggest an extra levy on vacant properties.

Expand healthcare access and family violence responses

The Barwon region's mental health service gaps mean people struggle to be assessed, especially outside hospital, and often receive inappropriate crisis responses. Barwon region organisations wanted an integrated Mental Health and Police Response (MHaP) partnership, where mental health clinicians travel with police to call-outs.

People in the region have difficulty accessing health services, compared with Melbourne. For example, specialist medical services and tests often have very long wait times. Public alcohol and drug treatment services are scarce, forcing people to use expensive, unregulated private facilities.

A family violence Support and Safety Hub is opening soon in Geelong. Local organisations want a genuine “hub and spoke” model, meaning locally-based, on-the-ground service “spokes” in places like Colac can connect with a central administrative “hub” in Geelong. Some women in more rural areas cannot access services in Geelong, and can remain at risk in isolation. The Hub must contemplate ways to maintain confidentiality in tightly knit small communities.

Barwon family violence services have gaps, including in services for perpetrators, access to community legal services, and services for women with disabilities. Barwon region organisations wanted reform of the refuge system. Refuges in the region are always full, often not accessible for people with disability, and have strict eligibility requirements excluding women with mental illness or drug and alcohol dependency.

Prevention services need more funding and support, including for preventing family violence and reducing gambling harms. One person called for a more holistic approach to prevention in schools, encompassing the many risks and challenges young people face. For example, services cannot do gambling prevention work with people under the age of 16.

Getting around the Barwon region

Organisations from Geelong and Barwon called for more frequent and accessible V/Line train services between Geelong and Melbourne, and extending the service to Torquay. They also wanted more local public transport services on the Bellarine peninsula. Peak times have few services, and services stop in the evenings or on weekends. This means people cannot reach shift work jobs or recreational activities.

High petrol costs disproportionately affect rural and regional people. For instance, one farming family spends \$300 to \$400 on petrol each week to get their children to school, sports and recreational activities. One person suggests the Victorian Government can help farming families by subsidising car registration.

Affording the basics

Some people in the Barwon region cannot access fresh, healthy food, leading to food insecurity. Participants suggested increasing funding for emergency food relief services, and introducing more education programs that teach people how to access and prepare healthy food.

Internet services across the region have low rates, high costs and poor coverage, and more people struggle to pay insurance and energy bills. This increasingly affects “the working poor”: one homelessness service provider said nearly one-third of the people who use their service have jobs.

Local organisations report the Barwon region does not have enough financial counsellors, with people waiting many weeks for appointments.

Getting a good education and job

Youth unemployment is very high in some parts of the Barwon region. Inter-generational unemployment was flagged as a concern. Children and young people who are not supported and encouraged by their families experience particularly poor employment outcomes. A much greater

investment is needed in parenting programs and support for vulnerable families. There was also widespread support for a region-wide mentoring response for vulnerable young people.

Rural parts of Barwon need meaningful jobs close to people's homes. Vocational education does not always meet the retraining needs of people transitioning from industries like manufacturing, after major job losses in Barwon. Vocational training to reskill transitioning workers needs more investment. Barwon region organisations think jobactive fails; for example, many job services only provide short-term support, rather than aiming for long-term, meaningful outcomes.

Embracing resilience and inclusion

Small local businesses are finding survival harder in the Barwon region. More people shop online or have groceries delivered to avoid high petrol costs, disconnected holiday-makers often do not shop locally, and small businesses struggle to compete with large national companies.

Competition also affects the community sector, with organisations forced to merge to stay viable, and new for-profit services entering the market, especially in disability and aged care.

Some smaller communities in the region have limited community infrastructure, like sports facilities, playgrounds and meeting spaces. Schools can more regularly offer their facilities to the community outside school hours, on weekends and during school holidays.

Similarly, libraries can contribute to community inclusion. Some inner Melbourne libraries are opening longer, as safe community spaces in the evenings and on weekends. Barwon region libraries can do the same.

Rate capping has affected traditional Local Government service provision. Local governments in Barwon deeply affect people's lives and their community connection, but some have reduced services like early childhood education and helping older people, leaving major gaps.

Ballarat and the central highlands

Priorities

- Increase social housing, transitional housing and crisis accommodation, close to services, employment opportunities and transport
- Improve public transport frequencies in the central highlands
- Increase Navigator program funding and work to reduce school disengagement
- Promote multiple tertiary education job pathways for young people, including rebuilding TAFE's reputation
- Improve student support services
- Funding food insecurity programs and FoodBank hubs
- Support families to pay for rising school costs and extracurricular activities
- Fill mental health service gaps and improve case management in the central highlands
- Support students' transition from early childhood education into primary school

Responding to rental stress and diverse housing needs

Many central highlands residents experience rental stress and cannot access social housing, or emergency or crisis accommodation. For instance, rents are around \$400 a week in the Hepburn region. In Ararat, for example, prison visitors are increasing residents' rental stress. The private rental market needs more stock, with local builders keen to work.

Some people become homeless, and live in cars or tents in the bush. Older people, those experiencing poor physical or mental health, or people with alcohol and drug dependencies are especially vulnerable.

Ballarat and central highlands organisations wanted more social housing properties in response, close to services, jobs and transport. Homes should match local community need, and include different sized houses and apartments, for example, tiny houses. Local organisations suggest the Victorian Government can legislate for local government land acquisition for social housing, and incentivise more community housing in the region. People also need different housing types, including crisis accommodation and transitional housing (particularly for perpetrators and victim-survivors of family violence). Central highlands organisations support including social housing in new developments by inclusionary zoning.

Addressing mental illness and family violence

The central highland's mental health service gaps affect people's physical health and work participation. People with mental health difficulties are often unsupported, because few case

management services are available. They must often manage alone. Many fall between Commonwealth and State funded systems, particularly those ineligible for the NDIS.

More broadly, the region has too few specialist services. Local organisations advocated for a coordinated approach, with partners collaborating to deliver holistic care and services. For example, a combined focus on lifestyle and behaviour for better physical and mental health and wellbeing. People outside Ballarat may not be aware of the available services, and so do not use them.

Family violence crisis response services in the Central highlands are not always responsive. Local organisations wanted a Family Violence Support and Safety Hub in the region to better coordinate services, and improved family violence training for community service workers. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the region distrust family violence services. Organisations from Ballarat and the central highlands suggest better cultural safety training can help.

Further, local organisations identify systemic gaps in gender equity programs and perpetrator services, like men's behaviour change programs. They want a bipartisan commitment to long-term funding to tackle family violence and achieve long-term change.

Cutting the cost of living

People struggle to get around the central highlands region. High fuel costs disproportionately affect rural and regional communities, because people travel further to work or to reach schools, sport, and recreation. Central highlands organisations want government to support communities to develop their own transport strategies, especially by supporting alternatives to cars, and improving public transport.

Around 12 per cent of Ballarat residents seek emergency food relief at least once a year.² This food insecurity compromises good health, for example, by forcing choices between buying food or medication. The Ballarat Foundation, in partnership with Foodbank Victoria, runs a food distribution hub, helping address the problem. Local organisations support more emergency food relief funding, including for social enterprises to distribute food.

People face high utility bills due to low quality housing stock, with many properties without sufficient insulation or solar energy. Parents face more stress juggling caring responsibilities when both work. More casual and insecure work also increases pressure on living costs, including securing mortgages. Organisations from Ballarat and the central highlands also felt the region needed more financial counsellors to help build people's financial capabilities.

Getting a good education and job

More school autonomy has meant more young people are expelled or suspended from school, particularly students experiencing disadvantage. The high concentration of private and public schools in the region produces strong competition to attract students. Local organisations feel this compels school principals to prioritise bolstering schools' reputation and university entrance

² <http://ballaratfoundation.org/2018/04/the-ballarat-foundation-partnership-with-foodbank-victoria>

scores. It also means less attention on VET subjects or pathways. Improved school careers education can make young people aware of all their further education options and job pathways.

The Central Highlands Children and Youth Area Partnership focuses on improving Year 12 retention rates and creating pathways to work. The region's Navigator program is currently oversubscribed, and parents actively seek services to help re-engage their children in education. Rising demand for the program needs matching funding. We heard around 1,100 young people in the central highlands region and are not in work or education.

Federation University and TAFE underfunding means many young people do not pursue vocational education as a job pathway. Low quality private RTOs have damaged the reputation of vocational education.

Despite more of Ballarat's young people finding work, pockets of disadvantage and intergenerational unemployment still exist. Young people without family support and encouragement often cannot get jobs.

Parenting programs and vulnerable family support needs more investment, especially in a region with high teenage pregnancy rates.

Ballarat and central highlands organisations observe mental health difficulties among young people. School wellbeing programs can support student's mental health, including by access to student support officers. Children's participation in local sport and out of school activities benefits their development, health and wellbeing. Families need more government assistance to pay for it.

Local primary school breakfast programs provide benefits, given many families struggle with rising cost of living pressures. School readiness and promoting transition to prep helps children have the best start at school.

Unstable funding affects outcomes

Community sector organisations struggle to deliver genuine outcomes with measurable benefits with unstable, short-term funding, often only provided for one or two years. Ballarat and central highlands organisations regard three years as a minimum to establish a program and measure its success. Organisations recruit, research and build relationships in the first year, implement and monitor thereafter, and devote the last six months to evaluation. Longer funding terms, such as five years, allows organisations to properly deliver programs and achieve the desired outcomes. The government espouses an innovation culture, but in practice organisations are punished for risk-taking or failure.

Warrnambool and the south-west

Priorities

- Build more social housing in south-west Victoria
- Incentivise construction of affordable rental homes
- Deploy existing south-west transport services more flexibly
- Collaborate between services to deliver holistically for children and families
- Increase schools funding to target support to children experiencing vulnerability
- Support place-based initiatives in the south-west to improve education
- Build hubs for online courses in towns across the region
- Develop a workforce strategy for the disability, aged care and youth sectors

Housing insecurity in the south-west

The south-west region has very limited public housing, contributing to homelessness and housing insecurity. Local organisations find it difficult to house victim survivors of family violence, and safely relocate perpetrators. The region's many tourists and seasonal visitors can crowd out housing options for others. For example, peak season motel prices in Warrnambool far exceed off-peak prices, making it even harder for people escaping family violence to find short-term crisis accommodation.

Tourism and rising housing demand also affect the rental market. Rents in Warrnambool and other regional centres are increasing, so people move further out for cheaper housing. But these places often have limited public transport and high fuel costs, restricting people's mobility and community engagement.

Some people will receive funding for specialist housing in the NDIS. But local organisations are not confident this specialist housing will be built in the south-west, because potential investors are not guaranteed tenants. People who do not qualify for NDIS housing funding have few alternative housing options.

Organisations from the south-west want more public and community housing in the region, especially universally accessible homes. Inclusionary zoning is one way to achieve this. They also wanted more affordable, accessible rental homes to be created. The recent family violence private rental assistance program is very successful, but providers expect funds to cease at the end of 2018. High demand is over-stretching homelessness services and needs extra resources.

Keeping the south-west healthy

Organisations from Warrnambool and the south-west nominate many rising health challenges in the region, including mental health, family violence, chronic disease, and drug and alcohol use.

Health prevention, such as healthy relationships education or the 'Baby Makes 3' program, supports long-term community wellbeing.

A large geographic area and dispersed population presents service delivery challenges. For instance, many services are in Warrnambool, with limited outreach capacity. People in smaller communities may struggle to travel there to access services.

Many parts of the south-west have good local service networks supporting children and families, and organisations in the region wanted support maintained for these local, integrated responses. Local community investment and building community capacity provides long-term support for communities. People recommend an asset-based community development approach, rather than focusing on deficits.

The region has a shortage of community services workers. Local organisations were keen to see more workers trained locally, rather than only recruiting externally, such as by offering relevant courses at the Deakin campus in Warrnambool.

Making ends meet

The south western economy depends heavily on producing food and fibre,³ creating variable household incomes. Fires effected many people in early 2018, and dairy market convulsions have hit family incomes. Living in rural areas may seem low cost, but few services and high transport costs increase the cost of living. Service withdrawal contributes to small towns' decline.

Some people in the region struggle to access to healthy, quality food, to learn cooking skills, and have cooking facilities, especially for those living in insecure housing or experiencing homelessness. The region can consider leveraging its proximity to farmers and fresh grown produce, for example, by examining farmers' markets regulation.

Organisations from Warrnambool and the south-west also supported increasing energy efficiency, for example, through providing solar hot water in social housing, or funding for energy efficiency upgrades.

Participating in work, education and community

The region's communities are already responding to low educational attainment by supporting children through school and beyond. New place-based initiatives must account for existing work, such as "Beyond the Bell". Local organisations wanted better support for students experiencing disadvantage to engage in school, such as through careers education and mentoring programs.

Education and work is compromise by scant transport links, especially for younger people. Public transport timetables often do not fit with work and education hours.

V/Line's Warrnambool trains often have limited accessibility, and the absence of public transport and wheelchair-accessible taxis can prevent people getting to regional centres from smaller towns. Local organisations wanted to explore more innovative use of transport, such as using school

³ Great South Coast Group, *Great South Coast Regional Strategic Plan: 2014-19*, p.8.

buses for community transport during their “down time”. They strongly supported greater investment in the region’s “roads and rail.”

The dearth of career pathways blocks young people from good jobs, especially those in the community services industry. Community services is a large employer in the region. Longer-term contracts, local study options, and better pay help the community sector become an “industry of choice” in the region. A better public perception, career development opportunities and supporting leaders helps value the industry’s social and economic contribution.

Embracing resilience and inclusion

People from marginalised communities benefit from affordable, accessible housing, ensuring services reach those who need them, and attracting and retaining a diverse workforce. This includes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disability, older people and LGBTIQ people.

This means safe, accessible services are available across the region (in regional centres and in smaller towns), reducing stigma and building inclusion, and supporting the delivery of culturally safe services. Organisations in the south-west recommend increasing funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations as well as building capacity in mainstream organisations.

Horsham and the Wimmera

Priorities

- Increase homelessness funding, especially to build life skills and transition to sustainable tenancies
- Increase social housing in the Wimmera
- Commit to a long-term approach to community health, safety and wellbeing by ensuring ongoing, sustainable funding and maintaining a partnership approach
- Ensure the region has sufficient sexual and reproductive health services
- Increase investment in primary prevention programs
- Increase the number of financial counsellors
- Better meet local workforce needs by exploring local training options and matching people to available jobs
- Build youth aspiration and resilience in schools, in partnership with young people and community organisations
- Invest in traineeships, work experience, school-based apprenticeships and training

Finding affordable, appropriate homes in the Wimmera

Housing problems in the Wimmera have many dimensions, including unaffordable and low quality rental homes, transient workers from large infrastructure contracts needing housing, inadequate homelessness services, and shortages of social and supported housing.

Finding housing for people with disability has become harder with the introduction of the NDIS. Although people may receive housing funding in their NDIS plans, little housing is available. Supported accommodation for homeless people is also scarce.

Many people cannot afford rents in Horsham, so they often move to cheaper rental homes in outlying towns. However, these are often low quality homes, in places with high transport costs and limited services. This impacts health and wellbeing, including reducing access to healthy food or health services. Outside influxes of workers for large infrastructure projects, like the development of windfarms, places extra demand on rental housing, with no extra supply.

Wimmera-based organisations wanted more social housing built in the region, and funding increases for wraparound supports for people experiencing homelessness, including to build their capacity, life skills and help them transition to sustainable tenancies.

Staying safe and healthy

Many promising health initiatives are underway in the Wimmera and Southern Mallee, and the region already has some strong partnerships. Local organisations wanted long-term vision and

investment, including ongoing funding, to create enduring change. Short-term project funding challenges organisations and does not sustain effective, existing programs.

Horsham and Wimmera organisations wanted to respond to family violence and gender inequality with more investment in community-level primary prevention to change underlying attitudes. For instance, the Communities of Respect and Equality initiative, led by Women's Health Grampians, has strong regional support but requires ongoing funding. Similarly, people supported current family violence programs and reforms, but these cannot meet regional demand. Dealing with family violence in rural areas has added complexities, like social and geographical isolation, and the lack of anonymity when seeking services. Local organisations worried the nearest Support and Safety Hub will be too far away.

Organisations from Horsham and the Wimmera identified a shortage of GPs, a lack of mental health services and rehabilitation services, and very limited access to sexual and reproductive health services and limited access to other services such as family violence support or financial counselling. They wanted more health service investment across the region, and ensuring existing health services deliver appropriate and accessible services to communities, in line with human rights principles.

Understanding the cost of living in the Wimmera

Many Wimmera communities rely on producing food and fibre for income. Communities can be affected by poor seasonal conditions, adding to cost of living pressures, and causing significant stress.

High fuel costs, long distances, and limited public transport contribute to high transport costs. In turn, these affect people's access to services, including healthcare. Internet costs can be higher in rural areas, and the quality of connection is poorer, similarly affecting people's access to services.

Local governments have fewer ratepayers and higher service costs, and council rates can be a significant cost pressure. Local organisations wanted more collaboration between local government and the community sector, including reviewing Council hardship policies.

Financial counselling is significantly under-resourced in the Wimmera, with waiting lists of up to eight weeks. Local organisations wanted more, better supported financial counsellors to reduce burnout and the impact of vicarious trauma.

Supporting education and work in the Wimmera

Local organisations saw great job opportunities in the Wimmera, but felt the region did not provide training relevant to available jobs. Strong community networks can help coordinate training and grow the workforce, including from people relocating to region. Greater collaboration between TAFEs and other training providers and the community services industry can also help.

Organisations from Horsham and the Wimmera wanted to help engaging young people in education and employment, including developing supported pathways into work. This could be done through school-based apprenticeships, traineeships, and funded work experience. Housing and other cost of living pressures can also affect students' learning outcomes and engagement, for example, if families move to find more affordable housing. Local Learning and Employment

Networks help engage young people and build their aspirations. Young people experiencing disadvantage and trauma, need appropriate support and resilience.

Shepparton and the Goulburn valley

Priorities

- Fund community development and resilience programs to build stronger communities and reduce loneliness and isolation
- Explore innovative social housing models for rural communities, building on international best practice
- Create inclusive schools to improve school engagement
- Provide long-term funding to support vulnerable children and families that starts early and provides wraparound support
- Better fund Neighbourhood Houses in the Goulburn valley
- Roll out financial literacy programs across the Goulburn region
- Ensure organisations are funded to deliver services in the Mitchell area
- Increase funding for alcohol and drug treatment services, especially pharmacotherapy and residential rehabilitation

Chronic housing shortages in the Goulburn valley

A chronic shortage of social and affordable housing contributes to more visible homelessness problems in the Goulburn valley. The available stock is not configured to the needs of different sized families, and doesn't meet transitional housing or student accommodation needs. Family violence perpetrators cannot be housed, sometimes preventing women and children from remaining in the family home. More innovative social housing projects can help meet local needs, such as internationally successful rent-to-buy schemes.

Goulburn valley organisations are particularly concerned about young people experiencing homelessness, and those forced to sleep rough in the bush. They gave the example of children going to school from a tent by the river. Too many young people leave out-of-home care without a safe and secure home to go to.

Crisis accommodation options, such as motels and caravan parks, are affected by seasonal work, for example during fruit picking season and the Shepparton Springnats event. Crisis accommodation funding is open to "gaming" by charging higher weekly accommodation rates than daily rates, reducing the numbers supported.

Keeping people healthy and safe

The Goulburn valley region has mental health and alcohol and drug treatment service gaps, especially for pharmacotherapy and residential rehabilitation. Community mental health services risk disappearing in the NDIS transition. People experiencing chronic illness, including diabetes

and heart disease, lack services and coordination support. The Mitchell region is a particular service “black hole.”

Rural and regional communities greatly benefit from community health services, but too often acute healthcare receives the bulk of new funding. Community health struggles to serve rural areas, as current prices do not match the full cost of delivering services. Telehealth can improve health service access. Health providers and consumers need more investment to build their telehealth capacity and expertise.

The region does not have enough services for children who have experienced family violence. For example, Shepparton has no specialist children’s counsellor. Preventing family violence needs a stronger local focus, including by working with children and young people in schools to address the underlying drivers of violence.

Some people don’t feel safe in their community and believe police often do not respond to calls for help. When they do, police can adopt punitive approaches that can be unhelpful and don’t deal with the reasons for crime.

Getting around the Goulburn valley and managing living costs

Travelling between regions is difficult. For example, only three services operate between Shepparton and Bendigo each week. Local organisations want more public transport services between regions and connecting small towns to regional centres.

Public transport is also very limited on weekends and early in the morning, stopping people getting to work, recreational activities and appointments. Older people’s public transport access challenges put them at risk of isolation and loneliness. Existing community transport services are full. The Victorian Government should consider more innovative and creative transport solutions, like demand responsive options and community transport.

Local government can play a greater role in coordinating, planning and improving transport options. Local planning can promote active transport, including by increasing walkability in regional towns, and promoting cycling.

Social security payments, like Newstart, are too low. More people with jobs need help to make ends meet, including with high energy costs, childcare, local government rates and education. People are also paying out-of-pocket for healthcare, and struggle to find bulk-billing doctors without long waiting lists. People need more financial counsellors and financial literacy skills.

More people experience food insecurity rates, and many families go without meals. Schools provide breakfast to vulnerable kids so they don’t start the school day hungry.

The Goulburn region has low rates of internet access. Many people cannot afford the home internet, impeding access to services and information. Build people’s digital literacy and computer skills needs education and support.

Getting an education and a good job in the Goulburn valley

The Goulburn region has high rates of school disengagement and refusal, often from bullying, and many schools are not addressing its underlying causes. Some families have intergenerational cycles of low educational attainment.

Organisations from the Goulburn valley consider many local schools do not have inclusive school cultures for children and young people with a disability, or those from families facing poverty and disadvantage. They simply refer students facing difficulty to other services, such as School Focused Youth Services, rather than adopting whole-school strategies for inclusive education. Schools and community service organisations must cooperate more, including by creating alternative programs targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Goulburn valley organisations supported including more life skills training in schools, and using technology to help improve long-term employment and wellbeing outcomes for vulnerable young people.

Vulnerable children and young people cannot participate in sport, and many sporting clubs in the area fail to welcome or include them. Mentors in schools can help children participate in sport outside school hours.

Shepparton has considerable intergenerational unemployment and poverty, becoming a target for many Commonwealth Government welfare reform initiatives, such as ParentsNext. However, Commonwealth Employment Services are divorced from Victorian-funded community services, working against integrated, wraparound services. Community organisations advocate for achievable, stepped goals for people, observing employment may not be immediately possible for everyone. Job readiness pathways can be built into school curriculum, and transitions must be supported.

Fast-paced State Government reforms to family violence and family services, and the NDIS rollout, are producing community and health service workers shortages, potentially undermining successful implementation. Labour shortages need more than a piecemeal response, and free TAFE places, while welcome, will not alone fix the problem. Careers counsellors and teachers need to promote the community services industry as a potential career path for students.

Supporting vulnerable families and children

The Goulburn valley has entrenched, intergeneration disadvantage. Families fall through the cracks because services are heavily weighted toward tertiary end support. Families from outlying areas such as Nathalia and Cobram miss out on support, because they are not at the “pointy end”.

Many children cycle in and out of out-of-home care. Child FIRST and Integrated Family Services currently have no capacity for early intervention. The region lacks perinatal and early parenting support for families. Aboriginal-specific kinder and maternal child health programs have been successful at addressing disadvantage faced by Aboriginal children.

Community inclusion and sensible reform pace

The Goulburn region is multicultural, diverse and very tolerant, with high volunteering rates. However, vulnerable people in the region experience loneliness and social isolation, particularly in outlying towns and farms. Loneliness can induce other mental health problems over time. People from CALD backgrounds with limited English face extra risks because securing appropriate interpreters can be difficult. Neighbourhood Houses need adequate and sustainable funding to provide information, referral and community building services.

People with disability cannot access the services needed for choice and control. Culturally safe service providers are needed too. Many buildings in the region are also physically inaccessible for people with disability. People need more help to navigate complex new systems like the NDIS and My Aged Care, including through better access to service coordination and advocacy.

The pace of change is causing “reform fatigue”, and is unsustainable in child and family services, family violence and the NDIS. Ambitious government delivery timetables compromise implementation, without considering operationalisation and managing risk. Unintended consequences and safety risks need more attention during systemic policy implementation.

The government role must be recast to support place-based reform approaches, including more flexibility for community organisations to identify and respond to local priorities with existing funds.

Wodonga and the north-east

Priorities

- Fund flexible learning opportunities for young people in the north-east
- Fund place-based and collective-impact approaches using existing partnerships
- Better coordinate transport services
- Educate employers to work with people learning English
- Build on the region's coordination and collaboration capabilities
- Promote the community sector as a way for young people to change the world
- Deliver flexible service delivery funding models
- Recognise the interdependence of physical health, mental health and wellbeing

Struggling with housing and the cost of living

The north-east region has too little public housing for single people, especially those with mental health issues. Families experiencing family violence have no emergency housing, and people requiring short-term accommodation have few options. Private rental housing is also in short supply, and often low quality. Poor attitudes to migrants and no rental history prevents new arrivals finding suitable rental homes, particularly larger families. Short-term, emergency and long-term housing is urgently required to meet growing housing demands, accompanied by cross-service, coordinated support.

Food, fuel, housing and utilities are increasingly unaffordable. Remote area energy costs can be very high, especially where gas is unavailable. People often prioritise food after paying bills, and this increasingly affects low-income working families. Fresh food can be expensive in remote areas, and its quality poor. Increasing poverty rates lead to women taking out NILS loans just to keep their children in school.

The region's public transport is inaccessible and poorly connected for people with disabilities, particularly women. Regional centres need direct services between them. Smaller bus services would be more effective, and service infrequency makes transport inaccessible for many.

Building healthy communities in the north-east

The north-east region has high levels of family violence and sexual assault, include coerced sexual violence. Local organisations were concerned the current focus is largely on intimate partner violence, and needs to be broadened to include violence perpetrated against carers, older people, children, support workers and within CALD communities.

Rural workers need to better understand these violence risks, generalist workers need more family violence, especially in rural and remote communities. Rural workers also need opportunities for debriefing, peer support, supervision and referrals.

All sectors require significant family violence awareness building – including police, GPs, and health and human service workers. More intersectional approaches can build relationships and underpin collaboration. Prevention programs require significant funds.

Family violence services find it difficult to serve such diverse communities, including people living in remote areas, people with a disability, and people from CALD backgrounds. The 9–5 service provision model is inflexible, and hinders reaching working families. People need significantly more outreach services, particularly people living outside the main regional centres.

People living in the north-east region lack healthcare, with fewer GPs per person than in metropolitan areas. Prevalingly private GP clinics block access for many people, particularly young people and those living on low incomes. Some GPs offer discretionary bulk billing, but many people aren't aware, or are embarrassed to request it. People find GP-centred care ineffective because they are disconnected from other local services. Many people complain their GPs dismisses their mental, emotional or wellbeing concerns, leading to later problems.

Organisations from the north-east wanted the region to focus on health literacy, education, prevention and promotion. Appropriate programs can increase food literacy, including cooking skills and food knowledge, for the people experiencing disadvantage, including those leaving the justice system.

People from CALD communities have trouble accessing all services. New Australian do not understand the disability service system. They may not even understand the concepts of “disability” or “carer”. Online information is not accessible for them, compounded by the lack of interpreters.

Our current healthcare system doesn't recognise the interconnections between mental health, physical health and wellbeing. It need to encompass all three. Local organisations think Wangaratta's mental health system is completely broken. Mental health remains stigmatised in the region. Hidden mental health problems produce social isolation, loneliness and disconnection, especially among people who may have a disability alongside a mental health issue. CALD communities can have particular stigma of “madness.”

North-east organisations find mental health services crisis driven and siloed, divided between crisis services, and those for people with mild mental health issues, such as depression. However, people in a stable phase of a mental health condition have no service access, meaning they must deteriorate into crisis before getting help. Programs for these people invariably receive only short-term funds.

Getting educated and finding work

Career-focused learning helps engage young people. Flexible learning options and a menu of choices helps support young people find their way in life. Young people also need adequate mental health services, as mental health difficulties can underpin disengagement. Many young people find work experience difficult to obtain, including by lacking transport.

The region will have diverse future workforce needs. New arrivals can find their language and literacy skills can be a barrier to finding a job. People require suitable TAFE, community college

and other education options, so qualified people can fill job vacancies, and so people experiencing disadvantage, including CALD communities, can find jobs.

Better community sector pay can help make it an “industry of choice”. Current short-term funding models do not promote job security. Promoting community service jobs as being value-based helps position the community sector as desirable, offering prospective workers a chance to “change the world.” Community services can be marketed as contributing to a better society and as a “helping” industry.

In the NSW-Victoria border region, dealing with two state systems causes significant complexities. Both clients and workers are challenged in navigating different services, eligibility criteria and systems.

Meeting children’s and older people’s needs

Early intervention services for children who may be vulnerable have very long waiting lists. Many families do not understand the needs of children who may display developmental delays. Children from CALD communities may not be identified due to language barriers. GPs and maternal and child health nurses need more training in identifying problems and in building relationships with families to address issues in children. For instance, childcare centre staff are not equipped to manage behavioural challenges of children in out-of-home care.

Current services for older people do not match the needs of an ageing population. Many places have few aged care services located distant from family and friends. Older people often struggle to navigate the My Aged Care system, and elder abuse is a growing problem.

Bendigo and central Victoria

Priorities

- Create more affordable housing and wraparound support to sustain tenancies
- Invest in worker training and develop the health and community services industry
- Increase local public transport, including community buses
- Partner with regional organisations to upgrade home energy efficiency
- Fund a regional food affordability plan
- Co-locate services at schools, such as mental health, sexual health, and parenting support
- Increase mental health investment, including for young people
- Grow the region's nurse practitioner program
- Expand community cultural change programs to achieve gender equality
- Match NDIS participant's needs with local services

Housing people in central Victoria

People on Newstart and pensions face an affordable housing shortage. High housing costs push people away from regional centres, such as Bendigo. They struggle with living expenses in areas with cheaper housing, due to higher transport costs and poor-quality housing driving up energy bills. Housing and homelessness services are overburdened – people face either long waiting times or no assistance. Housing services have seen no increases in funding. Disability also contributes to long-term and recurring homelessness, and cannot find suitable housing.

The region should host “Housing first” programs to settle people in permanent homes. Single people especially need emergency and short-term housing. Two Bendigo caravan parks have closed and no camping sites are free. Better caravan park access and a youth refuge could help.

Haven; Home, Safe run a residential complex consisting of 23 one- and two-bedroom homes with a mix of singles, couples and families with 24/7 support. Many residents are single mothers. The target age range is 17 to 35 years. The housing includes a “social curriculum” program run collaboratively with other agencies, incorporating personal growth and development, social and emotional skills; training and employment; home management and tenancy skills; health awareness; and advocacy, leadership and civic participation.

Public-private housing models like “Common Ground” and shared equity schemes are promising. Local councils can release land to make building new housing easier and less costly. And some public housing sites have space for more housing. Housing support services coordinate multi-disciplinary services, such as mental health and disability services. Federally, rent assistance should rise so more people can afford private rental housing. Taxation reform, such as reducing negative gearing, can assist.

The region needs a broader, recurrently funded strategy to reduce homelessness, bringing together many community organisations. It can include greater public support and community-based social media campaigns

Keeping Central Victoria healthy and safe

Central Victoria's main health challenges include unhealthy eating; insufficient mental health services (particularly early intervention and services for people not covered by the NDIS); heart disease; out-of-pocket health expenses; a lack of public transport and difficulty reaching health services; and a lack of GP services. Limited alternatives place too much pressure on GPs to be "everything". Health services have trouble attracting and retaining staff.

Rural communities need more GPs and allied health services, such as speech therapy. People think nurse practitioners are "brilliant," and support their practice being expanded, particularly for outreach. Central Victorian organisations want more mental health services, including intermediate services to prevent mental health problems escalating to crisis level, and children's services including outreach to schools. Local professionals should support the expansion of telehealth to translate medical information and follow up patients.

Other initiatives worthy of investment include: extra child protection services; fluoridation of water supplies; expanded dental health programs in schools; community heat health programs and climate change preparedness; active living and healthy eating programs; heart disease services for women; and incentives for pharmacies and GPs to issue pharmacotherapy. More broadly, regional health funding should incorporate the regional service delivery's extra costs, such as transport costs in outreach.

Tackling family and gender-based violence requires more outreach services. Specialists should deliver the Respectful Relationships curriculum in schools. Teachers are time poor and school leaders do not always support the program. Local early intervention programs are successful, such as the sexually harmful behaviour treatment program run by the Bendigo Centre Against Sexual Assault. Family violence legal and financial counselling services are urgently needed, particularly in rural areas.

The Victorian Government should prioritise preventative and cultural change programs in central Victoria, such as bystander training for sporting clubs, schools and workplaces. Preventative programs should be long term and linked with local government health and wellbeing programs. The 'Rural Challenge' program works with local CFA brigades, and football and netball clubs to embed gender equality.

Inadequate transport and high living costs

Central Victoria's public transport is inadequate and has low uptake. Limited public transport means most people depend on a car to get around. Petrol costs are high and running a car is a major household expense.

Services to Melbourne are too slow, and not enough buses connect people with trains. Most people also need transport in their local area to reach jobs, health services and education, and buy food. Central Victoria requires more local, frequent train and bus services. Community buses work

well and can be expanded – a good example is the Royal Flying Doctor Service and Heathcote Health’s community transport service, allowing people to attend medical appointments. Active transport and properly regulated ride-sharing can help too. Inadequate public transport is causing informal, unregulated ride-sharing to emerge, especially for young people at night, posing safety risks.

High energy costs hurt households and small businesses, particularly large families. Energy marketing, including confusing discounts, misleads people into paying too much. People need clearer energy price information.

Poor quality housing also drives high energy bills. Rental housing often does not have basic energy efficiency measures like insulation. Private tenants deserve minimum housing standards; and energy efficiency and solar upgrades are needed across private and social housing. The Bendigo Sustainability Group is currently raising funds to install solar systems on community housing properties. This can be scaled-up across the region.

In some parts of central Victoria, people can more easily access unhealthy fast foods than fresh produce. Local organisations suggest planning restrictions on take-away outlets. Fresh food delivery services can also help, especially in rural areas. Emergency food services like Foodbank can help, but people also need support to build capability and resilience over the long term, for example, through cooking clubs, kitchen gardens, and financial capability programs. The region needs an holistic, community-led food security response, canvassing all aspects.

People also struggle with childcare costs, out-of-pocket health fees, and unaffordable or inadequate digital services, which can compromise delivery of other services, such as telehealth.

Helping people build skills and find work

The region’s young people need better transitions to further education, including to “hands-on”, skills-based courses, like apprenticeships. It also needs properly funded youth and mental health services. Multi-disciplinary services can be located in schools, such as mental health, sexual health and other services. More support systems are also needed at the local university.

Educational disadvantage is intergenerational – schools should engage parents in their own education in a school setting. Positive educational initiatives can be broadened, such as Aboriginal Elders role-modelling in schools, which currently occurs in Swan Hill. The Navigator program should be expanded to Bendigo.

The region has relatively high unemployment. Growth in service industries has changed the structure of employment. Agriculture and food-processing often employ temporary residents, including backpackers and former 457 visa holders. There precarious workforce is growing, including casual or fixed-term contracts, and part-time hours, and underemployment is a problem. When work is available, insufficient public transport cannot get people there.

The region has some advanced manufacturing from global companies, helping reduce unemployment. And a social enterprise café gives unemployed young people skills, experience and confidence in the workplace, enabling them to seek employment elsewhere.

Highlighting to young people the positive changes community services make to society can help the sector become an “industry of choice,” rather than being portrayed as the “welfare” sector.

Supporting families facing vulnerability

Central Victoria lacks enough services for vulnerable families. Existing services have long waiting lists. Too many services are short-term; long-term services are needed to build relationships. Young children need more early years intervention, and children require more attend preschool (not merely register), especially in Aboriginal families. The region needs an integrated family services model, and state-wide family strategies, such as a parenting strategy and a youth strategy. DHHS child protection workers in Bendigo are under too much pressure.

Mental health services need more investments, especially for young people. Vulnerable families benefit from better access to medical services such as bulk-billing GPs, sexual health services, after hours clinics and nurse practitioners. Better links should be established between schools and community services with some co-located. Flexible housing for young people can also assist vulnerable families.

The Victorian Government can invest in early intervention and prevention rather than crisis responses. Universal services need to link better with secondary and tertiary services. Investments should be made in training and professional development for the community services and health workforce, and social infrastructure.

Embracing inclusion

People with disability need to access all services under the NDIS, including allied health and mental health services. People are finalising NDIS plans but then cannot find local providers, such as speech therapists. Rural areas are particularly disadvantaged by a lack of disability services. Central Victorian organisations feel governments do not comprehend the different disadvantage rural and regional areas experience. Responses need to be “rural proofed” so they work in rural areas.

Disability workers are not always appropriately trained. People working on NDIS plans sometimes do not understand disability. Worker casualisation, low skill levels and low wages can produce poor quality NDIS and aged care services. Rural communities face a double whammy – they may not even have a GP, let alone be able to choose service providers. Disability workers need better support in the NDIS transition.

Aboriginal people in the region face the challenge of “just being heard”. Workers find it difficult to access training and information. Market-based systems are not working (e.g., in health services), and some providers are no longer tendering for services in north-west Victoria. For LGBTIQ people, counselling services are limited outside of Bendigo.

Mildura and the Mallee

Priorities

- Establish a Mallee Housing Taskforce to audit housing demand and supply, and make recommendations for change
- Support integrated service models and place-based approaches
- Increase Navigator program funding and reduce school disengagement
- Rebuild the reputation of vocational education and training in the region
- Employ more careers education advisors in schools to build partnerships with regional industries to construct a pipeline for young workers to get jobs
- Improve student wellbeing through supporting student support services
- Support universal access to 15 hours of early learning before school
- Invest in a local residential detox and rehabilitation facility

Tackling unaffordable housing in the Mallee

People in the Mallee region cannot find affordable rental housing, with large waiting lists and limited stock. Seasonal workers increasingly stay permanently, driving up housing demand. People have limited access to social housing and crisis accommodation, and short-term emergency accommodation is full. As a result, people become homeless, or are pushed into more remote areas of the Mallee in search of cheaper housing, but with limited access to services. Many banks are restricting finance, so people struggle to secure mortgages.

Organisations from Mildura and the Mallee called for more housing, including private rentals, social housing and transitional and emergency accommodation, close to services, jobs and transport. The Victorian Government can help fund low-cost housing construction, supporting people build their own home, while undertaking a TAFE qualification. This would build community pride and support local apprenticeships for young people. They could also build flexible accommodation for seasonal workers, helping free up existing rental homes.

Given the region's housing challenges, people suggested establishing a Mallee Housing Taskforce to audit housing demand and supply challenges, and recommend solutions.

The region needs a residential detox and rehabilitation facility to treat people close to their homes, families, and other support services.

Fostering community collaboration in the Mallee

Human services are siloed in different government agencies, at different levels of government. Mallee-based organisations felt they were at the bottom of the funding system, and cannot influence funding decisions despite responsibility for delivery. Competitive tendering impedes collaboration and hampers good outcomes. People have limited choice of a handful of services in the region. Funding is focused on outputs, instead of outcomes. Ageing volunteers will affect organisations' service delivery.

Organisations from the Mallee wanted to adopt a true place-based approach, with strong local governance and accountability. They supported integrated service models and place-based models focusing on shared outcomes and effort. An example is Hands Up Mallee,⁴ which works with the community, businesses and services to give a healthy and safe start to life to every child in the region.⁵ Hands Up Mallee has a team helping coordinate and align the efforts of many. It is supported by the Northern Mallee Community Partnership and Mildura Rural City Council, but needs more funds.

The education journey through school to work

The Doveton model reimagines a school as a community asset - a hub to deliver education from early childhood to vocational training. The first 1000 days of a child's life are important for their development. The Victorian Government should support universal access to 15 hours of early learning for all three- and four-year-olds.

The Navigator program improves student engagement. However, only students with less than 33% school attendance are eligible. This means many students who can benefit from participating currently miss out. Mallee organisations wanted more investment in the Navigator program and more student support workers to help support re-engage students, and improve their wellbeing.

Careers education helps young people identify their skills, strengths and interests to develop a path to further study or work. Employing better qualified school careers educators means students can access up-to-date knowledge on employment trends and local opportunities. Careers educators can build relationships with major regional employers, to construct a worker pipeline.

Vocational education has been devalued over the last decade, with parents, families, schools and students avoiding "dodgy, for profit" providers as a path to employment. The Victorian government can rebuild vocational education's reputation to instill confidence for students to select it as a job pathway. TAFE courses should train students for jobs in the region.

Affordable housing shortages near jobs drive unemployment in the region, along with inadequate transport and the changing workforce structure. To compensate, the region must invest in training people to fill looming skills gaps, or increase skilled migration.

⁴ <https://www.handsupmallee.com/>

⁵ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59fabd9490bcce30df85b49f/t/5a39f11de2c483597797830f/1513746740567/HUM+Directions+Paper+FINAL+Online.pdf>

Appendix: Consulting regional communities

In June 2018, VCOSS convened 10 roundtables across Victoria to explore with regional community service organisations what the State Government can do to make sure all regional and rural Victorians can live a good life.

The roundtables form part of a regional engagement project undertaken by VCOSS. The aim of the project is to create social policy for regional Victoria, by regional Victoria.

Consultation participants

Participants came from a cross-section of health and community services, including local government, community health, housing, family violence, Neighbourhood Houses, and child and family services.

Registration for the roundtables is detailed below.

| Location | Date | Participants registered |
|-------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| Morwell | 4 June 2018 | 28 |
| Bairnsdale | 5 June 2018 | 10 |
| Geelong | 19 June 2018 | 24 |
| Ballarat | 20 June 2018 | 38 |
| Warrnambool | 21 June 2018 | 21 |
| Horsham | 22 June 2018 | 12 |
| Shepparton | 25 June 2018 | 19 |
| Wodonga | 26 June 2018 | 14 |
| Mildura | 27 June 2018 | 13 |
| Bendigo | 28 June 2018 | 36 |

Regional roundtable discussion papers

Prior to the consultations, a series of 10 discussion papers were prepared by VCOSS policy staff and circulated to consultation participants. The discussion papers helped focus discussion and identify possible areas for reform and action.

The discussion papers included:

- Data and evidence about key social policy issues in each identified region
- Case studies and examples from community sector organisations consulted in each region
- Possible recommendations for the Victorian Government, drawn from the VCOSS State Election Platform 2018 *Delivering a good life for every Victorian*

Consultation process

Consultation participants were divided into small groups to discuss social policy issues related to:

- Finding a place to call home
- Staying safe and healthy
- Affording the basics and getting around
- Getting a good education and job
- Giving children a great start
- Embracing resilience and inclusion

These topics were drawn from the VCOSS State Election Platform 2018. Not all participants and roundtables discussed each topic, but every discussion group identified a series of policy priorities and actions.

Each discussion group identified a series of policy priorities and actions. At the end of the consultation session, participants were asked to vote for the priorities they ranked of most importance to their local region. These rankings are reflected in the priorities identified for each region in this report.

While this report does not seek to capture every conversation that occurred during the consultations, it does reflect the main discussions that emerged from the process.

Next steps

The information in this consultation report will be used to develop platforms that highlight regional priorities and promote place-based strategies and solutions.

VCOSS will be consulting with member organisations and stakeholders to further refine the priorities identified.

VCOSS will then work with regional organisations in the lead-up to the state election in November, promoting the identified priorities and seeking commitments from local candidates to address them.

