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# VCOSS Submission to the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

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The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body for the community services sector in Victoria. VCOSS advocates for a fair and equitable society by supporting the social service industry and representing the interests of Victorians facing disadvantage.

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations. Green space improves health and wellbeing but its distribution across Victoria is inequitable.

VCOSS recommends expanding environmental infrastructure in areas with poor access to parks and green space and prioritising suburbs and regions with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. Future planning also provides an opportunity to increase the availability of cool routes and community gardens.

## Increase green space where it is needed most

### Recommendation

Expand green space to suburbs and regions with the least access.

Melbourne has the lowest proportion of green cover of all Australian capital cities.<sup>i</sup> Low-income households are disproportionately located in the areas with the least green space.<sup>ii</sup> Victorians who would gain the most from the wellbeing benefits provided by parks are most likely to miss out.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the impacts of the inequitable distribution of environmental infrastructure across Victoria, particularly when Melbourne residents were not allowed to travel beyond 5km for exercising or socialising.

About 135,000 Melbourne households have little or no access to parks within 5km, which deprived around 340,000 Victorians of open space during the hardest restrictions.<sup>iii</sup>

Considering that outdoor activities pose the lowest risk of transmission and are a key part of the return to COVID-normal, lack of access to green space will continue to disadvantage people without a park nearby.

A direct health impact of green space is improved air quality, due to the ability of trees to absorb carbon dioxide and other pollutants.<sup>iv</sup> Parks also provide indirect wellbeing benefits such as: physical health by exercising in fresh air; mental health by connecting with nature; and socialisation by participating in community activities.<sup>v</sup> Low-income Victorians are at higher risk of developing chronic health issues like cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, for example, which can be ameliorated by the active lifestyle that green spaces can encourage.

The planning of environmental infrastructure should prioritise areas of Melbourne and regional Victoria with low green space to improve equity. The Victorian Government's Pocket Parks program is a good example of a program supporting green space development in high density and priority areas.<sup>vi</sup>

DELWP's 'Cooling and Greening Melbourne Interactive Map' collates spatial data of vegetation cover, urban heat and socio-economic disadvantage and could be expanded across Victoria and used to inform future greening projects.<sup>vii</sup>

## Ensure green spaces are free and accessible to everyone, including children

### Recommendation

Ensure green spaces are free, accessible and promote play

Public green spaces need to be open and accessible to everyone, including children, women, older people, people with disability and people on low-incomes. Parks will not promote community cohesion and inclusion if they are poorly planned, do not meet physical accessibility requirements, are hard to access via public transport, are poorly lit or make people feel unsafe.

Communities should be engaged and consulted in designing their own public spaces. This will make sure spaces are inclusive and fit-for-purpose while reflecting local need and matching the rhythms of community life.

The needs of children are sometimes overlooked in urban planning and decision-making. Play is essential to children's learning and development. Safe outdoor spaces like parks and playgrounds provide children with opportunities to play, socialise and exercise, especially for families living in apartments or crowded homes without private backyard space.<sup>viii</sup> The needs of children and the principles of play-friendly spaces should be incorporated into decisions about environmental infrastructure.

## Reduce the health impacts of extreme heat

### Recommendation

Increase green space in areas with high heat vulnerability.

Climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of heatwaves.<sup>ix</sup> Community service organisations are already concerned about the impacts of extreme heat on their clients.

Low-income households are more likely to be thermally inefficient homes and rising energy bills are a major source of financial stress, compounding people's vulnerability to heat stress.<sup>x</sup>

According to VCOSS member reports, many people living in poor quality housing cannot afford the cost of running an air conditioner, forcing them to seek relief in shopping centres on hot days and to wander the streets at night until their home has cooled enough to sleep. Mallee Family Care in Mildura reports hospitalisations due to heat stroke and dehydration, spikes in antisocial behaviour and alcohol abuse, and children unable to concentrate at school.<sup>xi</sup>

The outside environment and the urban heat island effect play an important part in heat vulnerability as well. Surface temperature in Melbourne is negatively correlated with income, meaning that households most vulnerable to heat are living in the hottest areas with less resources to cope.<sup>xii</sup>

Increasing the tree canopy in Melbourne and regional centres is important, and it should be fast-tracked as an urgent health priority to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of vulnerable households. It would also reduce the burden on community health organisations and domestic violence services, which both see a spike during heatwaves.<sup>xiii</sup>

Ambitious urban greening targets would result in economic savings for households as well. A 'Cool Streets' initiative by Blacktown Council in NSW reduced annual power bills by an average of \$249 through tree planting.<sup>xiv</sup>

## Expand the availability of cool routes

### Recommendation

Reduce heat exposure during active transport.

Extreme heat hinders social and financial wellbeing, but it also inhibits people's ability to travel and access essential services. An air-conditioned car is the best protection when travelling on hot days, but the ongoing costs of car ownership can be a barrier for low-income households.

Transport disadvantage is a significant problem in regional Victoria and outer Melbourne where public transport is infrequent or inaccessible.<sup>xv</sup> Without access to a car or public transport, many people are forced to travel on foot for work or other commitments.

RMIT is reducing heat exposure during active transport through a navigation tool that determines the most thermally comfortable route for pedestrians and cyclists.<sup>xvi</sup> 'Shadeways' integrates maps with data of surface temperature, green space and tree shading and is currently being trialed in Bendigo.

All Victorians should have access to a tool like 'Shadeways' to help people find routes that maximise parks and tree cover to reduce heat stress. These tools should also be used in planning and designing environmental infrastructure.

## Help community gardens grow

### Recommendation

Fund community gardens and healthy eating education programs.

Community gardens are an effective use of public space. They improve local access to nutritious and affordable food and help educate residents about healthy eating and growing their own produce. Many community organisations, including Neighbourhood Houses, are investing in community gardens or other local food initiatives to combat escalating food insecurity.

Establishing new community gardens should be encouraged and could be incorporated into plans for constructing new parks or redeveloping existing ones. Budgets for maintaining green space could also include funding for local organisations to maintain these assets and lead education programs about healthy eating.

This submission was prepared by Ben Latham and authorised by VCOSS CEO Emma King.  
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A fully accessible version is available online at [vcoss.org.au/policy](https://vcoss.org.au/policy).

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- <sup>i</sup> Climate Council, *Clean Jobs Plan*, AlphaBeta, July 2020.
- <sup>ii</sup> Resilient Melbourne, *Living Melbourne: Our metropolitan urban forest*, 2019.
- <sup>iii</sup> A Lakhani, D Wollersheim, E Kendall and P Korah, *About 340,000 Melburnians have little or no parkland within 5km of their home*, ABC News, 12 August 2020.
- <sup>iv</sup> Erin Stewart, *New city parks are a breath of fresh air*, The Age, 3 February 2019.
- <sup>v</sup> Resilient Melbourne, *Living Melbourne*.
- <sup>vi</sup> DELWP, *Local parks: Investing in green space for local communities*, 9 September 2020.
- <sup>vii</sup> DELWP, *Cooling and Greening Melbourne Interactive Map*, November 2019.
- <sup>viii</sup> Christine Alden, *Coronavirus spotlights equity and access issues with children's right to play*, The Conversation, 7 May 2020.
- <sup>ix</sup> Climate Council, *Heatwaves: Hotter, Longer, More Often*, 2014.
- <sup>x</sup> NCCARF and CSIRO, *Pathways to climate adapted and health low income housing*, 2013.
- <sup>xi</sup> Mallee Family Care, *Extreme heat driven by the climate emergency: impacts on the health and wellbeing of public housing tenants in Mildura, Victoria*, University of Sydney, December 2019.
- <sup>xii</sup> Resilient Melbourne, *Living Melbourne*.
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- <sup>xiv</sup> Amanda Hoh, *Sydney squeeze: Lower your electricity bills and reduce the heat island effect by planting more trees*, ABC News, 23 March 2017.
- <sup>xv</sup> Graham Currie, *Where the wheels come off: transport poverty and disadvantage*, Insight, VCOSS, July 2014.
- <sup>xvi</sup> RMIT Centre for Urban Research, *Shadeways*, 2019.