



We're behind YOUth




VCOSS Submission to the Victorian Youth Strategy

December 2020

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.

 /vcoss
 @vcoss
 ChannelVCOSS
 vcoss.org.au

This submission was prepared by Talisha Ohanessian and authorised by VCOSS CEO Emma King.

For enquiries please Deborah Fewster at deborah.fewster@vcoss.org.au

A fully accessible version is available online at vcoss.org.au/policy/



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

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



Contents

We're behind YOUth	1
Introduction	5
Victorian young people are healthy and well, mentally and physically	8
<i>Health</i>	8
<i>Mental health</i>	9
Victorian young people actively participate in learning, education and training	12
<i>Education and training</i>	12
Victorian young people are economically active and contribute to the economy.....	14
<i>Employment</i>	14
<i>Regional and rural areas</i>	15
<i>Transport</i>	15
Victorian young people are connected to culture, community and civic life	17
<i>Environment and Climate Change</i>	17
<i>Emergency management</i>	19
Victorian young people are safe, experience equality of opportunity and are treated fairly ..	21
<i>Family violence</i>	21
<i>Youth justice and community safety</i>	22
<i>Disability inclusion and access</i>	23

<i>Caring responsibilities</i>	<i>24</i>
Government, community services and the youth sector are accessible, appropriate and coordinated, and respond to young people's evolving needs	26
<i>Homelessness and housing</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Child protection and out-of-home care.....</i>	<i>27</i>

Introduction

Young people know what they need to feel healthy, safe and empowered. This submission does not seek to articulate the key issues, barriers and solutions for young people. Young people are well-placed to identify these challenges themselves and are already doing so through the engagement process for the Victorian Youth Strategy.

Instead, the purpose of this submission is to sit underneath the voices and experiences of young people and describe how community services organisations can help to create an inclusive, accessible and equitable Victoria for young people (i.e. this submission essentially responds to discussion question 4 of the *Victorian Youth Strategy Discussion Paper*).

In particular, as the peak body for community services, VCOSS's submission highlights the opportunity to dismantle *systemic* barriers that constrain the community sector from working optimally with, and for, young people to achieve the priority outcomes identified in the *Victorian Youth Strategy Discussion Paper*.

Many of the issues raised in this submission are not new. However, they have been brought into sharp relief by COVID-19.

One of these is an increased understanding of the important role that youth workers play in specialist and general settings. There has long been a need for government to ramp up its investment in youth work to make good on reform agendas in family violence, youth justice and other areas of social services reform. This has become more crucial in the context of COVID-19's impacts on young people and social recovery.

Another pre-existing issue, heightened by COVID-19, is the need for a sustainably resourced community sector.

Young people look to community services to keep them safe from neglect, violence and abuse. To provide non-stigmatised information, advice, support and connection/referral when they are concerned about their mental health or alcohol or other drug use. To help them get housing and sustain it. To provide a pathway back into education. To help them dream big and blaze a new trail into vocational training or employment. And much, much more.

The need for these supports – already at significant levels pre-pandemic – has been exacerbated by COVID-19.

In order to respond to increased demand and ensure timely, holistic and comprehensive responses to young people, and deliver on the promise of a new whole-of-government, multi-sector Victorian Youth Strategy, it will be important for young people that government acts on a range of long-standing systemic issues in the community services sector. These include:

- Moving from short-term to long-term contracts so that there is continuity of essential support for young people (including continuity of workers)
- Introducing a fairer rate of funding indexation to ensure services can cover the full cost of delivering support and avoid young people being put on waiting lists or being turned away
- Providing resources that assist frontline community services to meet the cost of implementing government reforms
- Strengthening investment in prevention and early intervention programs across a range of service areas, so that young people can access early help before an issue tips into crisis
- Investment to grow and skill the community services workforce.

As we've already stated, the community sector has long advocated for increased investment in specialist and generalist youth work – in part, because we understand how youth workers can contribute significant value to the implementation of social services reform on the ground. In this context and, also, given that the new Victorian Youth Strategy is intended to increase cross-government and cross-sector collaboration, VCROSS's submission highlights the opportunity to:

- Integrate and align existing strategies, including the *Youth Justice Strategy*, the *Roadmap to Reform* and the *State Disability Plan* to improve outcomes for young people
- Consider a whole-of-government outcomes framework that addresses the needs of children and young people holistically – this includes recognition that what happens in a young person's life from 0 – 12 significantly impacts their circumstances and needs from ages 12 – 25.

Finally, we put forward three principles that we believe should be at the heart of the next Victorian Youth Strategy:

- The **voices of young people should be amplified** across all areas of government and the community. This means *all* young people, particularly those who have been rendered ‘voiceless’ by structures and systems that disempower them and create barriers to their participation.
- All young people should have **direct access to meaningful decision making** in their communities, particularly about issues that affect them.
- **Co-design** is a vital but often missing piece in ensuring services and programs are fit-for-purpose. Young people should be engaged to design services and programs they use and be remunerated or paid in-kind for their time and expertise.

Victorian young people are healthy and well, mentally and physically

Health

Young people have described access to safe, inclusive and affordable health and community services as “*crucial*” in the *Victorian Youth Strategy Discussion Paper*. They have particularly highlighted the need for services that focus on preventing ill-health by intervening early, and the need for a more equitable distribution of specialised services – for example, LGBTIQ+ community-led health services.

One way we can be responsive to young people’s needs is to ramp up investment in the community health system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the crucial boundary spanning role of community health. Community health services across the state have played a critical role engaging communities and providing a link between acute health services and community-based care as well as joining the dots between the health and social services systems.

A key reason community health is able to so effectively ‘join the dots’ between these very different service systems is that they apply a ‘social model of health’. This means that they operate with the understanding that health is ‘socially determined’. Services are intentionally designed to be responsive to age, as well as gender, sexuality, culture, family and peer context – including whether a person is living free of violence, has safe and affordable housing, is attending school, engaged in training or has a job, and has enough income to meet their essential needs.

Community health services also have a strong place-based context and embed user-voice/community participation. This is reflected in specialised services for young people, such as the Way Out health promotion program delivered by Cobaw Community Health for LBGTIQA+ young people in the Macedon Ranges.

Looking ahead, the community health system can be an important enabler for the Victorian Youth Strategy. To leverage its full capability, the capacity of community health services should be increased in future State budgets, alongside other connected service systems.

This is particularly important in the context of COVID-19 – its impacts on young people and social recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic saw Victorians in lock-down for months as a preventative community safety measure. Restrictions on bars and public gatherings had the effect of increasing alcohol use in the home including for young people,¹ where it can be harder to monitor consumption and increase exposure to alcohol advertising.

Current advertising practices through digital platforms such as Facebook² and increased access to alcohol through on-demand platforms, including ‘buy now, pay later’ services, is encouraging alcohol use and changing drinking patterns.

These are areas that require additional attention from government to ensure young people and others in the community are not being disproportionately targeted or affected by the negative impacts of increased alcohol consumption through a flooding of marketing by the alcohol industry.

VCOSS welcomes additional funding for alcohol and drug treatment services and workers in the 2020/21 State Budget, which will make a dent in the number of people waiting for assistance, and new roles to support people waiting for residential treatment will help keep people engaged in the meantime. It is important that these services are accessible to young people, and that policy and funding for the specialist Alcohol and Other Drugs sector is responsive to new and emerging needs that young people identify.

It will also be important to integrate the Victorian Youth Strategy with other pieces of work such as the Victorian Government's *Women's sexual and reproductive health plan*.³

Mental health

The *Victorian Youth Strategy Discussion Paper* states that young people want “easy access to tailored mental health and other support services that improve their health and wellbeing”.

Community services have a key role to play in supporting young people to engage in conversations about mental health, identify concerns and help them to connect to specialised mental health services. Community services also provide support with other intersecting issues, such as family violence, homelessness, alcohol or other drug use, or disability.

¹ L Hutchins & S J Law, ‘Alcohol harm hiding in the home’, *Croakey*, 20 August 2020.

² Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education & Cancer Council WA, *An Alcohol ad every 35 seconds. A snapshot of how the alcohol industry is using a global pandemic as a marketing opportunity*, May 2020.

³ Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, *Women's sexual and reproductive health: Key priorities 2017-2020*, March 2017.

However, a range of systemic issues currently prevent community services from supporting young people to experience the “easy access” they have identified as a priority outcome.

These systemic issues include:

- Inequitable service access – young people (particularly those in regional or rural areas and outer-suburban growth corridors) may miss out on support because:
 - Funding is inadequate to meet demand and services are effectively ‘rationed’ (via tight eligibility criteria, caps on service access or waiting lists)
 - Services are not located in their area at all – this may be due to funding and/or because there is a shortage of qualified staff working in, or travelling to, the local area.
- Rigid catchment boundaries for specialist clinical mental health services – if a young person relocates to another catchment, the system does not flex to provide continuity of support. Typically, the young person must start over with services in their new locale. This disrupts young people’s journey to recovery – not only is the young person required to establish new relationships of trust with clinicians, but they may not receive an equivalent service response given the significant variation in service offerings across catchments. This particularly impacts young people who are highly mobile as a consequence of their homelessness.
- The mental health system’s ‘missing middle’ – young people whose needs are too severe for the primary healthcare system but are not sufficiently complex or urgent for the specialist clinical mental health system, are missing out on mental health support. Parts of the community services system (such as disability, youth homelessness, out of home care and youth justice) are currently left to pick up the pieces.
- Insufficient system capacity in prevention and early intervention – the key to good mental health is prevention, however, investment in mental health promotion (one element of prevention) has lagged relative to investment in physical health promotion or, indeed, the crisis end of the continuum.

The Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System has already recognised these concerns in its *Interim Report* and the State Government’s 2020/21 Budget has made commitments to clinical mental health supports, with more to come in the 2021/22 Budget and future budgets once the Royal Commission has handed down its *Final Report*.

This underlines the key point made in the introduction of this submission – that is, the importance of integrating key policy reforms with the Victorian Youth Strategy to enable cross-government and cross-sector collaboration. In terms of cross-government collaboration, VCROSS also makes the case for increasing access to supports in environments young people are familiar with. For example, the Victorian Government should boost existing programs that are embedded in education and training settings, such as the Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary Schools initiative. This has recently been extended to include specialist schools and could be leveraged to create greater links with other community based mental health services.

Victorian young people actively participate in learning, education and training

Education and training

Young people have identified the need for a “*flexible and responsive*” education system that works for all students and highlighted the need for greater support in the transition to work.

Government, the community sector and business already work closely with education and training providers to support young people’s wellbeing and engagement in learning, but more could be done to strengthen collaboration and fill existing gaps to improve outcomes for young people.

Current policy and systems challenges include:

- The cost of education – because Victorian government schools are not currently funded to cover the full cost of delivering free, high-quality education, many students and their families face significant out-of-pocket costs⁴ and this acts as barrier to young people’s participation. Community service organisations including emergency relief services bridge the gap for many families each year,⁵ but many are overwhelmed with requests for assistance. Government and the community sector can better work together to ensure young people are able to equitably access the full school experience by fully funding public schools and providing additional funding to emergency relief services to meet demand. In particular, in future budgets, the Government can review and update the way they calculate the Student Resource Package, in line with recent Victorian Auditor-General’s Office recommendations⁶ and a 2015 report on *Additional School Costs for Families*,⁷ to make sure schools are fully funded to cover the costs of the standard curriculum, without families bearing the financial load.

⁴ E King, ‘*Soaring back-to-school costs highlight education funding shortfalls*’, VCOSS media release, 24 January 2020.

⁵ Community Information & Support Victoria, *The Stress, the Strain & the Pain: The impact of school costs on families and the CISVic sector*, May 2020.

⁶ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Management of the Student Resource Package*, August 2020.

⁷ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Additional School Costs for Families*, February 2015.

- Ensuring all students can access timely support to have their wellbeing needs addressed – while there has been substantial, sustained investment in wellbeing supports through the Education State, there were gaps for some students and some schools pre-pandemic and these gaps have been exacerbated by COVID-19. As part of social recovery efforts, and new Budget commitments, it will be important to listen to young people to fully understand new and emerging needs, as well as residual unmet demand from before the pandemic, and to target resources accordingly. In order to leverage student voice, there is a need to enhance the capability of schools to listen to, understand and know how to respond to young people's needs and ensure the right supports are available at the right time, including in the classroom.
- The impact of the Victorian Youth Strategy can also be enhanced by strong partnerships between the education system and community services system. Currently, community service organisations partner with government and education and training providers to deliver a range of health and wellbeing support to young people that supports engagement in learning. However, there are resourcing shortfalls to meet need in school settings, and significantly limited options at TAFEs. As a partner with the education system, there is an opportunity to extend the role of the community sector to support more young people to remain engaged in education and boost retention in training, provide more integrated support to young people to navigate transitions between education and training settings and between employment, and increase flexible learning options.
- There is a need to improve communication so that young people don't have to carry the burden of continuously retelling their story to access support in school settings and further education and training.

Victorian young people are economically active and contribute to the economy

Employment

In the Victorian Youth Strategy Discussion Paper, young people have identified “*grave concerns about rising unemployment*”.

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing issues experienced by young people prior to the pandemic, including higher rates of unemployment and underemployment relative to other age groups and the loss of entry level positions which provide young people with a pathway into the labour market. Young people are highly skilled and ready to work – but barriers outside of young people’s control impact their ability to gain employment.

The community services industry is one of the fastest growing job creation industries in Victoria and a pipeline of skilled workers is needed to meet community demand for vital services. Despite strong enrolments in Free TAFE in priority industries, the community sector does not have the resourcing or backbone support to provide the supervision required to support student placements. This is because of the systemic issues described in the introduction to this submission: insecure funding, low rates of indexation and workforce shortages.

The Victorian 2020/21 Budget has welcome initiatives to create jobs and invest in school-based applied learning and pathways support for young people.⁸ However, some employers lack the confidence and expertise to work with young people, including understanding the role of supervision and support. What’s needed now are targeted strategies to boost employer skills and confidence in employing young people.⁹ This would also benefit employers supporting students on work placements.

⁸ VCOSS, ‘*Finding a good job: Victorian 2020 State Budget Analysis*’, accessed 9 December 2020, <<https://vcoss.org.au/advocacy/vicbudget2020/jobs-skills/>>.

⁹ For example, this checklist, developed by VicHealth through a youth citizens jury: VicHealth, *Staying on Track. Check-in opportunity for employers: Young Victorians recommend these actions to support wellbeing at work*, January 2020.

Pathway support from vocational education and training into employment could also strengthen transitions for young people. Government schools have access to a range of supports including mental health services and the newly announced Jobs, Skills and Pathways Coordinators.

There are existing, highly-effective programs that can support students experiencing additional barriers to training and employment and support transitions, however, they need to be funded to offer resource-intensive supports, including to young people who experience greater barriers to workforce participation (for example, young people with disability or young people who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander).

Regional and rural areas

Rural and regional areas are vibrant contributors to the Victorian community. Place-based solutions should be prioritised to support young people to remain in their communities if they choose. This will require hearing from young people about the particular barriers they face, followed by investment in local communities and the necessary infrastructure to support good community outcomes.

For example, demand-driven funding in the VET space can influence decisions of VET providers about which courses to run in order to bring in sufficient revenue to remain viable. As a result, VET courses in rural and regional areas don't always reflect job opportunities in the region. This makes it difficult for young people to understand and explore future career opportunities that may enable them to gain meaningful employment in their local community post-school.

Transport

Everyone should be able to get to work and education and participate in community life – but the reality is that access to public transport in Victoria, particularly in rural and regional areas, is haphazard. The WestJustice Travel Assistance Program¹⁰ found that, for some young people, the cost of getting to and from school can become a major barrier to attendance. Cost of transport is one of the hidden costs of education that the Government can address by providing free transport passes to students who need it.

In many rural and regional areas as well as urban fringe areas not having access to a car is a barrier to accessing services, including education and employment.

¹⁰ WestJustice, *Travel Assistance Program*, September 2020.

Community transport provides services, either direct transport or support to access public transport, for people who are transport disadvantaged Community transport is affordable, flexible, accessible and adaptable to individuals' needs enabling them to participate in daily life¹¹

Community transport can play a vital role in increasing accessibility of transport for those who can't access or can't use cars or other transport because of cost, geographical isolation or mobility issues, however, it needs additional funding to meet community need. Where access to transport infrastructure may not be viable, investments should be made in community transport to increase young people's opportunities to access the services they need and to meaningfully engage with employment opportunities. Young people's voices need to be central in discussions about what transport services meet their needs.

¹¹ VicTas Community Transport Association, 'Welcome', accessed 9 December 2020, <<https://www.vtcta.org.au/>>.

Victorian young people are connected to culture, community and civic life

Environment and Climate Change

Young people can be enabled and empowered to act and be connected with their communities by supporting their communities to cope with the impacts of climate change and adapt to local challenges. However, community service organisations experience barriers in working more effectively with and for young people to provide these opportunities.

A common barrier is insufficient access to the skills, knowledge and resources needed to develop programmatic responses to cope and adapt to climate change locally that are co-designed with young people. Governments can work together with community service organisations, local business as well as education and training providers to provide the needed infrastructure.

For example, Banksia Gardens Community Services' place-based initiative, the Climate Adaptation Requires Youth Action (CARYA) project "aims to interactively teach youth about climate change and provide resources for them to develop their own community initiative."¹² This program has two distinct parts - a 10 week training program to build the cohort's understanding of climate change adaptation, followed by the young people creating their adaptation initiatives with the support of a mentor with relevant expertise.

Banksia Gardens Community Services CARYA program

CARYA is hosted by Banksia Gardens Community Services, a vibrant neighbourhood house and community service organisation that serves the Broadmeadows community in the City of Hume. The organisation aim is to build social cohesion and reduced structural disadvantage through a non-judgemental, strengths-based approach.

¹² Banksia Gardens Community Services, *C.A.R.Y.A Climate Adaptation Requires Youth Action Instructor Manual*.

The Banksia Gardens Public Housing Estate has a long history of dealing with social challenges, including low health and employment outcomes, low educational attainment and high levels of violence and crime. Hume also has one of the highest rates of settlement of newly arrived families and approximately 33 per cent of estate residents are from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The intended participants of the CARYA program will be cross-cultural youth. Through an action competence approach with significant educational experiences, CARYA will mature a strong cohort of climate change adaptation leaders. Over the course of the training program, the cohort will connect with local organisations to share knowledge and create a climate change adaptation network.¹³

For community service organisations to work with other stakeholders to better meet the needs of young people in providing connection to their communities and access to decision making, programs like Banksia Gardens Community Services CARYA need the appropriate infrastructure and resourcing to succeed. For example, this program is free to participants and covers the costs of travel as part of the training, including during workshops and other activities. However, many community service organisations operate on thin budgets and can't absorb new program costs into their business as usual budgets. In addition, CARYA has partner organisations to provide participants with mentoring and avenues to implement their initiative, including through local and state government. Establishing partnerships is a valuable but resource-intensive activity. Many community sector organisations are constrained in their ability to invest time and other resources in partnership development.

Not all organisations will have the necessary tools from the outset to ensure programs are meaningful, inclusive and empower a diverse range of young people. For example, non-youth specific organisations who are not co-located with other services may need support in connecting with a range of diverse young people to co-design a program or approach, or to form an advisory group. Organisations may need training and support in how to facilitate community and youth-led programs, or additional training on putting appropriate structures in place to ensure engaged young people are appropriately reimbursed for their time and expertise, either through remuneration or skill development and mentoring.

¹³ Banksia Gardens Community Services, *C.A.R.Y.A Climate Adaptation Requires Youth Action Instructor Manual*, p.1.

Emergency management

The environment and climate change are well documented areas of concern for young people,¹⁴ but missing from the discussion paper is emergency management, which provides important points of connection to civic life and opportunities to meaningfully contribute to decision making.

“Emergency Management is about managing risks to communities and the environment,”¹⁵ and a key role of the emergency management sector is to strengthen the capacity of communities, government, agencies and businesses to plan for, respond to and recovery from emergencies.¹⁶

The emergency management sector has undergone significant change since the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires¹⁷. However, there is still work to be done in shifting from a top-down approach to a community-led response that includes and empowers young people to be agents of change and to contribute to and build community resilience.

The emergency management sector can more effectively work with and support the agency and capacity of young people to contribute to their own recovery and recovery in their community by working more closely with community service organisations. Many community service organisations have experience and expertise in areas including engagement and education, and various facets of service provision. Importantly, their existing networks and structures reach far into communities, and can effect real change.¹⁸

Communities need time after an emergency event to process what has happened and to collectively develop a plan. Under a more collaborative approach that supports communities to lead in this role, young people need to be given the opportunity to identify what they need in terms of support and service provision, but also to identify how they can contribute to recovery.

A more collaborative approach, including formal and informal partnerships from across and within governments, businesses, the not-for-profit sector and the community, is needed to achieve this.

¹⁴ E Carlisle, J Fildes, S Hall, B Perrens, A Perdriau & J Plummer, *Youth Survey Report 2019*, Mission Australia, 2019.

¹⁵ ACROSS, *Emergency Management: Prevention, Preparedness, Response & Recovery*, *Resilience Community Organisations*, 2015, accessed 9 December 2020.

¹⁶ Emergency Management Victoria, *What we do*, 2018, accessed 9 December 2020.

¹⁷ Inspector-General for Emergency Management, *Review of 10 years of reform in Victoria's emergency management sector*, October 2020.

¹⁸ Council of Australian Governments, *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*, COAG Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Canberra, 2011.

Specialist youth organisations and youth workers need the time and resources to meaningfully engage with young people to understand their needs and goals as part of the emergency management process, and to provide the infrastructure and support for young people to take the lead. Larger universal organisations may need additional support to build skills and capability to undertake this work.

Continued funding and resources for research about what children and young people need during emergency events is needed, ensuring the voices of children and young people are amplified in the process.

Victorian young people are safe, experience equality of opportunity and are treated fairly

Prevention and early intervention programs are essential for young people who witness, experience or use family violence. They are also essential for young people who are involved in the youth justice system, or who are at risk of involvement, alongside key principles of diversion and therapeutic support.

Governments and community service organisations can better work together to coordinate resourcing and infrastructure across community-based initiatives and government funding streams to improve prevention and early intervention programs.

Family violence

Many community service organisations, government agencies or universal services will come into contact with young people who need additional support to minimise the impacts of experiencing family violence or address adolescent use of family violence, but do not have the requisite skills to identify, evaluate and respond to young people's needs.

Community service organisations need additional support to build the skills and capacity of staff to address these gaps, or additional funding to obtain external independent evaluations to ensure a best-practice approach.

For example, one of the early findings from a research project on programs that focus on adolescents using violence undertaken by The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare in consultation with Domestic Violence Victoria¹⁹ indicates that a range of programs use differing evidence-bases, making it hard to identify and embed best practice.

Organisations need more support to implement outcomes-based measurement practices to help lift the evidence-base to identify which projects work best and with which cohorts of young people. Staff skill and expertise is part of this.

There are also service and program gaps that mean community organisations may not be able to meet the needs of young people experiencing specific challenges related to witnessing or experiencing family violence such as poor mental health which can in turn

¹⁹ Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Adolescent Violence in the Home*, accessed 9 December 2020.

result in poorer academic outcomes, and psychological trauma.²⁰ More investment is needed to develop early intervention programs to minimise the negative effects of violence on children and young people.

More investment could also be made in primary prevention programs to minimise the number of children and young people being exposed to or using family violence. One way this could be approached is to target new parents, who face higher risks of violence, through programs like Baby Makes 3,²¹ or through school-based programs like Respectful Relationships.

Youth justice and community safety

Systemic responses to youth justice can vary significantly based on the setting, funding stream and availability of appropriate and tailored services. In addition, when systems work in silos it creates additional barriers to successful outcomes for young people in the youth justice system. The Victorian Youth Strategy can play a role in dismantling these siloes by advancing its goals for greater cross-government and cross-sector policy and funding alignment.

As a member of the Smart Justice for Young People (SJ4YP) coalition, we concur with the joint submission prepared by convenor of SJ4YP, YouthLaw, that:

“Fragmentation and lack of coordination happens vertically (between state and local government), horizontally (between different agencies), by age (such as antenatal and postnatal, preschool, school age, tertiary), and by different groups or areas of focus (such as parenting support, family violence, job seeker).”

“This same fragmentation is replicated in government and non-governmental contracted services. Investment is often ad hoc, not sustained. Until now, there has been no unifying message or way of talking about child and youth wellbeing or way of aligning efforts to a common set of goals. Victoria’s strategy provides us with a momentous opportunity.”

²⁰ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Children’s exposure to domestic and family violence*, CFA Paper No 36, December 2015.

²¹ Whitehorse Community Health Service Ltd., *Baby Makes 3: Project Report*, VicHealth, 2011.

A key recommendation of the SJ4YP submission, noted at the outset of the VCOSS submission also, is the need for a whole-of-government child and young person's outcomes framework.

As the SJ4YP submission states, an outcomes framework would make clear:

- What children and young people need and want to be well and thrive in life
- What government needs to do to enable this
- How the community sector can contribute to this vision.

It would lay bare what resources young people need, and where they are best located, driving smart investment decisions. This is desperately needed, given the significant barriers that young people currently experience in accessing prevention, early intervention, diversion and therapeutic support.

An outcomes framework would also drive greater accountability. Importantly, it would provide an opportunity to strengthen youth voice. It is essential that young people be included and consulted across areas of reform that may have a disproportionate affect on them. For example, new laws to decriminalise public drunkenness should include consultation with young people, particularly those who may be disproportionately affected through over-policing.

Disability inclusion and access

Young people with disability access and interact with all themes set out in the *Discussion Paper*, as do young people who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. To achieve the strategy's dual goal of building a community where there is equal opportunity and all young people are treated fairly, the rights and needs of specific cohorts of young people need to be integrated and reflected across each area of policy.

For meaningful change to take place to create a safe and equitable community for young people with disability, in addition to targeted supports and investments, there need to be sustained efforts to shift attitudes and improve awareness of disability across the community.

Young people with disability are best placed to provide their insights and ideas on what needs to change and key priorities for the Victorian Youth Strategy, as well as the Victorian Government's whole-of-government *State Disability Plan*, which is currently in development.

From a broader collaborative community perspective, a lack of awareness and targeted training about disability and disability rights across a range of workforces prevents or limits opportunities for young people with disability to be actively heard, listened to and believed. For example, attitudes and awareness can impact access to appropriate and timely health diagnoses, aspirations and confidence in education settings, and opportunities to have a voice in NDIS planning and other life choices and decisions, to name a few.

“I struggle with general questions being impolite due to having ADHD and autism. So I ask a question and they say, wow that’s rude. I don’t feel supported and I don’t feel like I’m able to ask the questions because there’s no attempt for them to understand in a way. I generally mute my mic in class and shut up because the way some people say things compared to how I say things – one of us is considered rude or not able to be understood, compared to how different I am to others and that kind of thing” – Trainee²²

Poor attitudes and awareness contribute to discrimination and can affect the way in which programs and services are designed and run. For example, underlying assumptions and attitudes that underestimate or undermine the aspirations, expertise and capacity of young people with disability can lead to service responses that prioritise the voices of parents and carers over disabled young people, and limit opportunities for young people to build their agency, confidence and independence to make decisions about their own lives.

All services across government, community, businesses and education sectors need to listen to, value and respond to the voices of young people with disability, both about their individual needs and their ideas for ensuring systems deliver better support for young people more broadly. Resourcing and training to enable co-design models is needed to help strengthen service design and shift attitudes.

Caring responsibilities

Greater system collaboration is needed to improve responses or supports for young carers when engaging with a range of services as part of their caring responsibilities, or through pursuing personal activities or supports. This will require additional resourcing and training to identify and respond to young carer’s needs. For example, systems such as the NDIS or My Aged Care do not currently consider the needs of carers but may be easy points of contact to capture young carers who need additional support.

²² VCROSS, TAFE: Accessible for all, November 2020, p.25.

Schools and community based organisations where young carers may frequent need support to identify young carers and offer flexible support to ensure young carers aren't missing out on opportunities, including education, employment and recreational activities because of their caring responsibilities.

Given young carers may not self-identify as a carer,²³ young carers may also not know where to go for support. Schools and community based organisations should be funded to provide proactive support to capture young carers who may not have the confidence to seek assistance or who may not know they can get help. This needs to be followed by genuinely flexible models of support, for example, flexible learning arrangements so young carers can still engage in education and training.

Greater consultation with young carers will identify their specific needs and the ways in which they can be supported to access a wide range of opportunities. This should also be aligned with the work of the *Victorian Carer Strategy*.

²³ Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, *Recognising and supporting Victoria's carers: Victorian carer strategy 2018-22*, June 2018.

Government, community services and the youth sector are accessible, appropriate and coordinated, and respond to young people's evolving needs

Homelessness and housing

Not-for-profit community service organisations provide services for people who are at-risk of or experiencing homelessness,²⁴ however, there continue to be gaps in addressing and meeting the needs of young people within the existing system. For the most part, these gaps relate to policy and funding.

The drivers for youth homelessness are not the same as the drivers for adult homelessness. Young people need a distinctly different response to adults. In order for governments and the community sector to better work together to provide *“more inclusive services for young people experiencing or at-risk of homelessness”*, the system needs to be adequately resourced to undertake risk identification and early intervention, and ensure young people receive a tailored response on entry to the system all the way through to exit.

Key systemic issues include:

- The need to grow expertise outside the specialist homelessness service system to identify and respond to risk factors for youth homelessness. In particular, we are not sufficiently leveraging the ‘first to know’ capabilities of workforces in universal services such as GPs, schools and Centrelink.
- The need to expand the provision of early intervention programs that address key drivers of youth homelessness
- Severely limited pathways for young people to exit the formal homelessness system – this includes a dearth of housing options for young people. This should be addressed through new policy development, including the Victorian Government’s 10-year social housing growth plan. We also advocate for the development of a Youth Homelessness Strategy, to be integrated with the Victorian Youth Strategy.

²⁴ Launch Housing, *Explainer: The homelessness services system and demand for services*, March 2019.

Child protection and out-of-home care

The *Roadmap to Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children* (the Roadmap), as the key strategy for reform of children, youth and families services, should be integrated with the whole-of-government Victorian Youth Strategy. This should include leveraging the voices, expertise and insights of young people with experiences in out-of-home care to achieve better outcomes.

The recent 2020/21 Victorian Budget's commitment to invest in new residential care facilities, build Care Hubs to provide wrap around supports for children and young people, and measures to reduce the over representation of Aboriginal children in care are welcome announcements to progress the reform agenda. The permanent extension to the Home Stretch program, which will now entitle every young person in out-of-home care in Victoria to receive extended care to age 21 instead of being left to fend for themselves at age 18, is also extremely welcome.²⁵

Looking ahead, as with the youth justice, family violence and homelessness service sectors, children, young people and their families need access to services that strengthen families, prevent child abuse and neglect, and intervene early when children and young people are at risk.

For children and young people in the system, as noted in the Ombudsman's 2020 *Investigation into complaints about assaults of five children living in Child Protection residential care units*,²⁶ child protection and out-of-home care workforces across government, the community sector and the justice system would benefit from additional training and capability development to:

- Better identify and respond to complex needs of some young people engaged with the system
- Connect young people in out of home care to supports across a range of systems based on their needs, for example, education, employment and the NDIS

²⁵ VCOSS, 'Supporting children and families: Victorian 2020 State Budget Analysis', accessed 9 December 2020, <<https://vcoss.org.au/advocacy/vicbudget2020/children-families/>>.

²⁶ Victorian Ombudsman, *Investigation into complaints about assaults of five children living in Child Protection residential care units*, October 2020.

- Embed processes to ensure out of home care facilities are safe and supportive so that young people feel confident to have their voices heard and their rights, interests and needs respected and responded to.

This will require funding and coordination, to ensure appropriate responses and referral pathways are adequately resourced. Further measures from the Ombudsman's report should be explored, funded and implemented alongside existing work aligned with the Roadmap.

