

March 2021



VCOSS response to the draft Infrastructure Victoria 30 Year Strategy

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft 30-Year Strategy. It is a thoughtful and comprehensive plan, with a welcome focus on addressing the infrastructure needs of vulnerable Victorians, and reducing inequities between population groups and geographic areas.

VCOSS welcomes the equity focus in the draft Strategy. Too often infrastructure development has focused on narrow economic benefits and ignored the potential to develop a fairer Victoria. Many recommendations multiple benefits of upgrading and building needed infrastructure, stimulating economic growth, and also progressing social benefits of accessibility, social connection and thriving local communities.

VCOSS has provided some comment on a limited number of the many recommendations in the draft Strategy. We welcome further conversations and engagement with the community sector about progressing these recommendations.

An infrastructure plan for the community sector

VCOSS strongly supports the call for a long-term infrastructure plan for **social housing and the social services sector** (recommendation 32), which should be co-designed with the community sector and local communities themselves. The community sector has often been left out of infrastructure programs or forced to compete with other sectors, like hospitals, for scarce infrastructure funds.

Past infrastructure spending has been inadequate to meet growing demand for community services. For example, in the past, the Aboriginal community controlled sector has estimated an infrastructure need of nearly \$120 million across Victorian Aboriginal community controlled health services.

Increased certainty would help the community sector plan for service growth and develop innovative new programs that benefit communities. Building design can

also help make services safer for clients and workers.

Investment in community services is win-win. It helps meet the needs of growing communities, as well as generating ongoing employment opportunities across the state, including in growth areas and regional Victoria.

The draft Strategy can consider how to make sure that employment benefits generated by this infrastructure spending flow to those most in need, or often locked out of employment opportunities.

Nominating specific targets for vulnerable cohorts would help ensure that as many people as possible benefit from the ambitious strategy.

For example, as part of the Victorian Government's social housing construction blitz, about 10,000 new jobs will be created. The Government has said up to 10 per cent of all the hours worked will be completed by apprentices, trainees and cadets and hundreds of new jobs will be created for Aboriginal Victorians, social housing tenants, people who are or have experienced homelessness and migrants and refugees.¹

Section 1: Confront long-term challenges

VCOSS welcomes the focus on energy efficiency in the draft Strategy. Investing in energy efficiency is a smart decision as we move through the COVID-pandemic. It will boost economic activity by quickly create thousands of jobs (for example in training, auditing, installation, manufacturing and local retail), while scaling up climate change adaptation measures, reducing load on the electricity grid and in the case of households, reducing energy bills and the risk of financial hardship.

In particular, we support the recommendations to **mandate a home energy rating disclosure scheme** (recommendation 5) and **make Victorian government buildings more energy efficient** (recommendation 6). The home energy disclosure scheme should focus on features, rather than overall performance, because it is easier for residents to understand, monitor and act. It could also be accompanied by more subsidies and no-interest loans schemes to assist low-income households to upgrade appliances or retrofit their properties to improve energy efficiency.

We would welcome the extension of recommendation 6 to community sector owned or leased buildings, which are often ageing and not energy efficient.

¹ Homes Victoria, Jobs and apprenticeships, <https://www.vic.gov.au/homes-victoria-jobs>

The switch to **virtual courtrooms and remote testimony** (recommendation 22) has helped some people resolve legal issues more quickly, and improved accessibility for some people with disability, reduced transport disadvantage for rural Victorians and helped victims of crime who may find attending court traumatising.

But many Victorians still live on the wrong side of the digital divide. Without internet at home, participating in virtual court proceedings is very challenging. An over-reliance on technology could make it even harder for them to enforce their rights or resolve legal issues.

The priority for digitisation should be on safety and access, not just efficiency and reduced delays.

We support the **replacement of ageing court infrastructure** (recommendation 22) with contemporary and flexible facilities that can accommodate demand. New facilities must meet accessibility standards, as people with disability continue to report difficulties accessing court buildings and facilities.

Extending Melbourne's green spaces and urban tree canopy (recommendation 37 and 71) should be particularly focused on low socio-economic areas of Melbourne. Melbourne has the lowest proportion of green space of all Australian capital cities²

and about 135,000 Melbourne households don't have any green space within 5km of their home.³ This problem is particularly acute in low-income areas, where there is less green space, and higher surface temperatures, leaving households vulnerable to the impacts of extreme heat.

² Climate Council, *Clean Jobs Plan*, AlphaBeta, July 2020

³ 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.

Section 2: Manage urban change

The proposed plan for **public transport accessibility and tram stop upgrades** (Recommendation 44) is especially welcome. Years of inaction mean only 15% of tram services are meaningfully accessible for people with mobility restrictions.⁴ Tangible timelines for implementation will help maintain momentum and accountability.

In general, VCOSS is supportive of many of the proposals related to **transport pricing** (recommendations 45-55). We note, however, that measures designed to change behaviour to encourage different modes of transport or times of travel may not benefit low-income or vulnerable Victorians. People in insecure work, with caring responsibilities or with mobility and health needs are likely to have fewer choices about how and when they travel, and less ability to change their behaviour in response to pricing signals. Ongoing consideration and monitoring must be given to the differential impacts on low-income and vulnerable people.

VCOSS has concerns about the impacts of **congestion pricing** (recommendations 51 and 52) on low-income Victorians. Congestion charges hurt people on low incomes, and people who are forced to use their cars.

To be fair, any road charging system would need significant exemptions and concessions for people doing it tough, and generous hardship policies.

The need to build and **upgrade hospital and clinical health infrastructure** (recommendation 58) is clear. But investing in community health infrastructure is just as crucial. Community health is too often forgotten and ignored in favour of hospitals.

COVID restrictions have placed additional pressure on ageing or inadequate physical infrastructure for many community health services. For example, VCOSS members have to limit appointments, or meet clients in parks because their interview and treatment rooms do not meet size and density requirements. With long waiting lists for some services, this makes it harder for people to get help when they need it.

The extension of the Metropolitan Health Infrastructure Fund to community health services in last year's budget is certainly welcome, but the sector is playing catch-up after years of underinvestment.

Investing in **digital and information technology (IT) infrastructure across the community health sector** would also help support the delivery of integrated care and partnerships, and shift to a more preventive model of care.

⁴ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Accessibility of Tram Services*, October 2020.

Section 3: Harness infrastructure for productivity and growth

Growth in social housing is desperately needed. VCOSS welcomes the recommendations to **set targets for social housing growth** (recommendation 73). But we can be more ambitious. In a 30-year strategy, in a state with a proud history of leading the nation in social investment, we can aim to do better than just meet the national average. Targets should also be flexible and responsive to local demand.

Social housing growth should include diverse models of public and community housing. Through the Big Housing Build, we need to identify a range of housing models and pathways that respond to a continuum of need, and provide different levels and lengths of support.

Housing that is easily modified to accommodate changing capabilities, such as the ability to install ramps, rails and to be able to move through the home without stairs helps people remain in their homes for longer while maintaining their independence.

We also support **upgrading the energy efficiency of social housing properties** (recommendation 95), especially in the hotter northern parts of Victoria. The energy efficiency improvements should be accompanied by information and guidance on how to manage energy use and keep housing cool to reduce bill-shock.

One in five Victorians live with disability, our ageing population is increasing and families with small children are excited to explore new places and experiences after the isolation of COVID-19. But many public places remain fully or partly inaccessible for people with disability, older people, people with mobility needs and pram users.

Investing in **accessibility upgrades for public places** (recommendation 56) is a win-win for Victorians, businesses and the building sector alike. But inaccessibility is not limited to public buildings. The recommendation for priority public building upgrades could be complemented by grants and incentives for small businesses, such as cafes and shops, to improve access to their premises.

Infrastructure for a better mental health system (recommendation 75) will be critical to the successful implementation of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. With the Royal Commission recommending 20 new area mental health services, and 50-60 local mental health and wellbeing services, as well as new Aboriginal healing centres, statewide mental health and addiction services and children and youth mental health services, infrastructure costs will be substantial. The new services should build on the strengths and relationships of existing community facilities, services and capital and ensure communities are consulted on appropriate facilities and locations.

Section 4: Develop regional Victoria

Community transport should be a pillar of the recommendation to **reform transport in regional areas** (recommendation 85). Community transport is affordable, flexible, accessible and adaptable to peoples' needs. The community transport sector in Victoria has been underfunded for many years. A clearer articulation of its role in the 30-year Strategy would be welcome.

The digital divide is especially wide in regional Victoria. Many households have no internet access at home. Being on the wrong side of the digital divide makes it harder to apply for jobs, access services, keep in touch with family and friends and increasingly, work or study. For students, access to a computer or device with an affordable internet connection can make sure they get the most out of school.

It is essential the Government continue to **address regional Victoria's digital connectivity upgrades** (recommendation 80). Focus in the most recent state budget was on improving business-grade broadband connectivity and removing blackspots. While these measures will help support businesses and jobs-growth in regional Victoria, more can be done to ensure households are not disadvantaged. As well as the physical connection, consideration should be given to how people can access affordable devices, free or affordable data and protection against disconnection for people struggling to pay their bills.

Libraries are a vital community facility, providing people with safe places to meet and connect, access to the internet, and many learning opportunities. As well as **better internet access in regional libraries** (recommendation 87), libraries can be supported through longer opening hours, upgraded facilities and shared community spaces.

VCOSS supports the recommendations to identify opportunities for **multipurpose, integrated shared facilities for local community organisations** (recommendation 89). Co-location can improve access to and integration of services and generate savings that can be redirected into service delivery. Integrated services can provide more tailored 'wrap-around' support, aiding social engagement, individual wellbeing and community development.

We note, however, that shared spaces may not be appropriate for all communities, geographic areas or groups of people. For example, co-locating family violence crisis services with other service types may put women and children at risk of being identified in some communities.

Some of the benefits of shared spaces may also be achieved through measures like shared IT capacity or virtual hubs, not just co-location. Engagement with community organisations and communities about local need, profile and risk will help determine what is appropriate for each community.

Residential alcohol and drug rehabilitation beds (recommendation 92)

are desperately needed in regional Victoria. Wait-times for treatment have blown out as a result of COVID-related demand and density restrictions.

To discuss this submission further, please contact Brooke McKail, Manager Policy and Research on brooke.mckail@vcoss.org.au

Currently, young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Victoria have limited options for support. The service system is designed primarily for adults. It's not equipped to respond to the unique needs of young people, or to provide them with the right support to access and maintain stable housing themselves.

VCOSS recommends addressing youth homelessness through a comprehensive new strategy that includes **more youth foyers** (recommendation 93) or foyer-like models that provide integrated learning and housing for young people.



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