




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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 ChannelVCOSS

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VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays respect to past and present Elders, and emerging leaders. This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.





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Chair's report



Never have Victorians relied more heavily on the community sector than during 2020–21.

The effects of COVID-19 and associated social restrictions have been felt in every part of society, and our sector has been critical in responding to the very real and pressing challenges our communities are experiencing.

From Neighbourhood Houses to community health services, from men's sheds to early learning centers, our members have faced unprecedented demand. They have gone above and beyond the call of duty, and we recognise and honour their work.

We also recognise the overwhelming fatigue these conditions can produce. VCOSS will continue to advocate for the sector and to work with government in addressing staff shortages, providing adequate pay and conditions, and enabling the sincere and ethical stakeholder engagement that our sector needs in order to keep helping people experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

The pandemic has thrown light on the chasms that exist between different parts of our society. It comes as no surprise that health status is affected by factors like socioeconomic status and job security, but these disparities have been particularly evident in the COVID era. Those living with poverty, insecure work, insecure

housing or homelessness, and with the effects of racism, ablism and social exclusion have been hit hardest.

The pandemic has also taught us that economics alone cannot be the driver of community. Thriving communities rely on social justice and the commitment to work together and build cohesion. Ultimately, the measure of our success is the wellbeing of all our citizens. This recognition of the centrality of wellbeing is at the heart of VCOSS's new strategic plan.

VCOSS will continue to advocate for Victoria to adopt a wellbeing lens in future budgets, and will keep working with the Victorian Government to ensure that all Victorians can benefit from a fair COVID recovery.

I would like to thank the past Chair, Stella Avramopoulos, and Deputy Chair Kim Sykes, and acknowledge their enormous contribution to ensuring that VCOSS is an established and trusted voice for the community sector.

Thank you to our tireless CEO Emma King, and to the whole VCOSS team, who have continued to represent and advocate for the sector with diligence and integrity.

There are huge challenges facing our communities and our sector. There are also huge opportunities to keep building on the momentum for a fair and equitable recovery and a poverty-free Victoria.

With a new Board and recent changes to the constitution, VCOSS is committed to representing our sector with a strong and clear voice, so that our members can keep supporting the Victorians who need it most.

If there was any doubt about this before, 2020–21 has shown us how much the community sector represents the very glue of our communities. Thank you to all our wonderful members.

Thank you also to our partners in government for working with us constructively and in good faith, to ensure better outcomes for all Victorians.

I look forward to supporting the sector in the vitally important work to come.

Damian Ferrie
Chair, VCOSS
CEO, Star Health

CEO's reflections



Dwelling on the year, I find myself thinking, uncharacteristically, in sports metaphors.

Perhaps this is because I'm writing against a backdrop of the Olympics and Paralympics going on in Tokyo, or maybe because racing imagery is currently so rife in political discourse – we've spent much of the year listening to debates about whether we're 'in a race' against the virus (we are), and now we're 'going for gold' in the vaccine rollout.

Or perhaps it's because, at this stage, we're all a bit exhausted.

It's okay to acknowledge the strain we're all under, as a society and particularly as a sector. Our members have literally held their communities together through some of the most difficult conditions any of us have seen.

With the interconnected health, economic and social crises of the virus there are Victorians whose incomes have been cut overnight; people trying to get by in small homes with kids sharing a device for home learning; people struggling just to pay the rent.

In these conditions there is immense demand on community service organisations, which have themselves been impacted by the virus with a loss of volunteers and standard operating conditions.

But our members keep showing up to support their communities – we know of organisations that have even gone door-to-door to check on people and ask what they need.

To keep running with the sports metaphor, 2020–21 was an endurance marathon. And like all marathons, it's harrowing and exhausting but also inspiring.

The work of our members is genuinely inspiring, and the whole VCOSS team is so committed to doing justice to our amazing members by using the strongest voice to represent and advocate for the community sector and the Victorians it supports.

I'd like to acknowledge the wonderful Stella Avramopoulos, our outgoing Board Chair. With her hard-working intelligence and caring, Stella has made an enormous contribution to the organisation over many years, and leaves a true legacy. In particular her work on the governance of VCOSS will continue to fortify VCOSS's strength into the future.

We were incredibly saddened over the past year at the death of our outgoing Deputy Chair Kim Sykes. Kim was an extraordinary advocate with a keen focus on improving health and wellbeing outcomes for our community. Her wisdom, humility, kindness and sense of fun left an indelible impression on me, and on everyone who had the good fortune to know her.

Over the sad course of just one week we also learned of the deaths of two other sector champions, Merle Mitchell AM and Brian Collingburn. So many people have reached out to tell me about their experiences with Merle and Brian; I feel lucky and genuinely humbled to get more insight into how our organisation has been shaped by such giants of compassion, energy and human reach. We have detailed some of their impressive achievements on page 26. Their legacies will be long-lasting.

Thank you to Damian Ferrie, Sue Woodward and Simon Trivett, who hold the roles of VCOSS President, Deputy President and Treasurer, respectively. Their

commitment to the contemporary governance and stewardship of VCOSS holds the organisation in good stead as we continue to work towards our vision and purpose. All the members of the VCOSS Board really go above and beyond in their commitment, on top of having demanding day jobs, and it's a genuine privilege to work with such wonderful and committed people.

And thank you to the incredible VCOSS staff, who have backed each other and shown extraordinary commitment this year, doing all the 'business-as-usual' work plus a whole new layer of representation, advocacy and information sharing – making sure members are connected with each other, with the media and with decision-makers, giving voice at the right time to the right people, and making sure they have the most up-to-date information in a fast-changing environment. All this while continuing the transition to working remotely.

We all wish, at this stage, that the marathon was over. We wish that we didn't have to go on coping with COVID-19 and with the social restrictions that are necessary but so damaging for so many. We wish we were 'back to the good things' already. That's natural.

But our team, our members, our partners and our sector keep inspiring me every day, and together I know that we'll keep going, keep working towards a state free from poverty and disadvantage, where the wellbeing of Victorians and their communities is put front and centre.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Emma King'.

Emma King
Chief Executive Officer

A fresh strategic direction

VCOSS has launched a new Strategic Plan to guide the organisation from 2021 to 2024.

The new plan sets a fresh and ambitious direction for VCOSS, identifying the *principles* and *enablers* that will help the organisation achieve its positive vision for Victoria.

The new plan places individual and community wellbeing at the organisation's core, and reconceptualises VCOSS's key areas of activity as:

- Advocacy and leadership
- Coalitions for change
- Thriving communities
- Inclusive and sustainable growth

The Strategic Plan will set the course for VCOSS over the coming years as the organisation – in partnership with members, partners and allies – works to build a Victoria free from poverty and disadvantage, with wellbeing for all Victorians and their communities.

A modern governance model

VCOSS held a Special General Meeting in April 2021 to vote on proposed updates to the VCOSS Constitution. The changes included adopting a new Board composition model and capping at nine the number of consecutive years a person can serve on the Board. More than 94 per cent of ballots cast supported the changes.

Just two months later, in June 2021, the VCOSS Annual General Meeting was held, at which the VCOSS Board welcomed two new elected members, Sue White and Chris Christoforou.

Four outgoing Board members were acknowledged: Stella Avramopoulos, Kim Sykes, David Brant and Sheena Watt, all of whom made significant and invaluable contributions to VCOSS and the Victorian community sector.

Particular tribute was paid to VCOSS's impressive and long-serving Board President, Stella Avramopoulos, who was first elected in 2011.

Subsequent to the AGM, Damian Ferrie and Sue Woodward were elected by the Board as the new Board President and Deputy President, respectively, and Simon Trivett was re-elected as VCOSS Treasurer.

And after a thorough process, two new Board members were appointed, Jill Gallagher AO and Lizzy Kuoth.

We offer genuine and heartfelt thanks to all our members who played a role in the important governance changes enacted this year, including those who nominated for Board positions.

VCOSS Strategic Plan 2021–2024

Vision

A Victoria free from poverty and disadvantage

Purpose

Wellbeing for all Victorians and their communities

Principles

Good living standards and prospects for all Victorians

Support for Aboriginal self-determination

Inclusive of all Victorians as equals without discrimination

Independent and non-partisan

Enablers

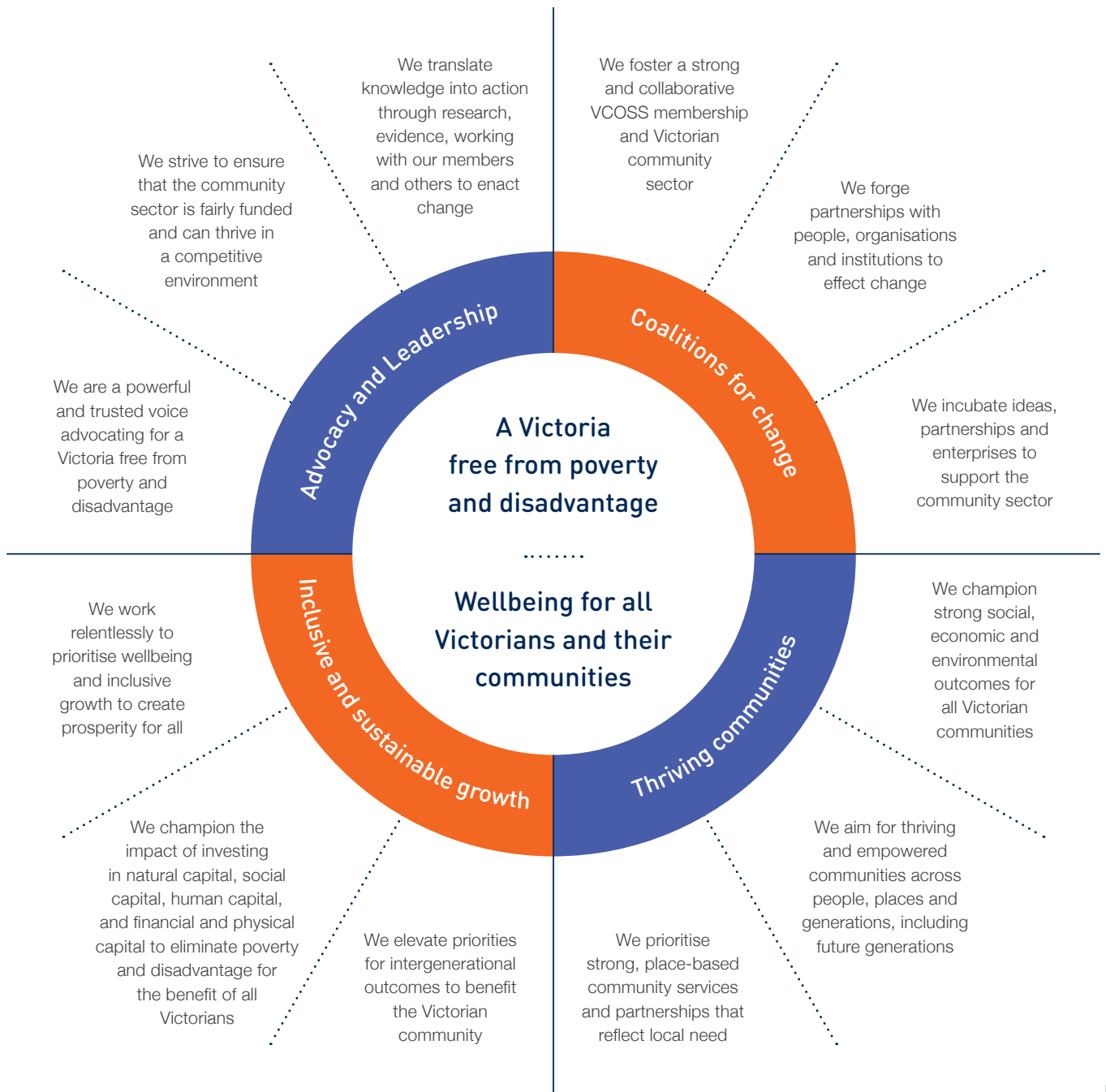
Our people, culture and behaviours

Best practice governance

Listening to, learning from and amplifying the experience and insight of VCOSS members

Harnessing the lived experience of people affected by poverty and inequality, primarily through VCOSS members

High quality policy informed by evidence



The big themes

Several themes and issues cut across much of VCOSS's work. Whatever the immediate issue at hand, we use the below headings to guide our analysis and actions. This is not an exhaustive list.

Wellbeing

Economic growth alone is a poor measure of a society's health. New, more contemporary measures are needed to identify challenges, measure successes and tailor programs and supports to those who most need them.

Community and individual wellbeing provide a more comprehensive way to conceptualise how our society is faring.

VCOSS – in partnership with a growing chorus of local and international partners – is campaigning for Victoria to become a wellbeing economy, and embrace wellbeing budgeting measures.

In line with the new VCOSS Strategic Plan, the concept of wellbeing is also being used to inform and guide the organisation's policy development and advocacy work.

Gender equity

Traditionally, Victorian women are more likely than men to be discriminated, disrespected, abused and harassed. This is true in the home, the workplace and broader society. COVID made this worse, with increasing rates of violence against women, and the burden of unpaid care also falling mostly on women.

VCOSS is committed to building a fairer and more equitable Victoria, and continues to apply a gender lens across our policy and advocacy work.

Given the high representation of women in the community services workforce, VCOSS is pursuing pay equity for women through our membership of the **Equal Workplaces Advisory Council**.

In 2020–21, VCOSS also continued to work with the Victorian Government and specialist organisations to implement the recommendations of the **Royal Commission into Family Violence**.



Aboriginal reconciliation

Aboriginal Victorians experience disproportionate impacts of disadvantage due to colonisation and intergenerational trauma. The **VCOSS Reconciliation Plan** envisions a just and equitable Victoria, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same opportunities and quality of life as all others. VCOSS believes the full potential of Aboriginal Victorians will be realised when communities are allowed to make decisions about their own futures, play a significant role determining policy approaches that affect them, and are trusted to deliver their own programs and services.

VCOSS is committed to walking alongside the Aboriginal community in pursuit of genuine self-determination and empowerment, especially through the work of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

In 2020–21 this included Aboriginal peak bodies working in a range of policy and advocacy spheres. The work of **VACCHO** and **VACCA** was crucial in supporting the successful pandemic responses of the Aboriginal community that have kept case numbers so low. Other important work was conducted by and with Aboriginal peaks committed to improving sustainability in the workplace, and with **Aboriginal Housing Victoria** through the **Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance**.

Community sector

VCOSS's policy, advocacy and government relations work is underpinned by deep engagement with our members. As we navigate complex social services reforms, we constantly ask the question: 'Is this in the best interest of the sector, organisations and people we support?'

Over the past year this central question has taken on new urgency. The level and complexity of people's needs has never been greater than during 2020–21. Compounding this, organisations needed to quickly change and adapt how they delivered services, while many also lost volunteer workforces and income streams.

This is against the backdrop of the ongoing pressures of short-term contracts, uncertain funding more generally, the Victorian Government's decision not to index and increase funding in line with the costs of operating, and workforce challenges.

VCOSS will continue to analyse issues, develop policy recommendations and in all other ways act so the sector is stronger and more sustainable.

VCOSS believes the full potential of Aboriginal Victorians will be realised when communities are allowed to make decisions about their own futures, play a significant role determining policy approaches that affect them, and are trusted to deliver their own programs and services.







Our policy impacts

Disability rights and representation

VCOSS continued to support collaborative systemic advocacy with disability advocacy organisations and self-advocacy groups through the **Empowered Lives** project. An Advisory Committee comprising sector leaders helped ensure a strategic focus on the most pressing matters, including the safety of people with disability during COVID-19. Together, we developed and put forward workable solutions to the Victorian Government. One area of focus was improving the accessibility of public health information and communication (for example, in relation to mask wearing for deaf and hard of hearing Victorians).

Through **Empowered Lives**, VCOSS also brought together advocates and self-advocates to formulate policy submissions to the **Disability Royal Commission**, the Victorian **State Disability Plan**, and to reviews and inquiries on various aspects of the **National Disability Insurance Scheme**. A particular area of focus was advocating against the Federal Government's proposal to introduce 'independent assessments' into the NDIS process. We were pleased to play our part in a winning campaign enacted by disability advocates and self-advocates across Australia.

Victorian disability advocacy organisations have faced increased pressure and demand since the introduction of the NDIS, from people needing help to access the scheme and/or to appeal decisions made by the National Disability Insurance Agency. In 2020–21 VCOSS oversaw the production of a flagship piece of research into the impact of the NDIS on disability advocacy. Through this project, VCOSS engaged the **Self Advocacy Resource Unit** and the **Disability Advocacy Resource Unit** to develop resources for the sector.

Empowered Lives also continued to build the power, voice, skills and capacity of disability advocates and self-advocates to convey their own messages to decision-makers and funders. We did this by:

- running training on government relations, storytelling, and using lived experience to support systemic and individual advocacy
- connecting disability advocates with **Victorian Parliamentary Committee** staff for a free training workshop about how to influence the parliamentary inquiry processes
- producing a 'systemic advocacy toolkit' for disability advocates.

Fair and effective climate action

In June 2021, VCOSS launched the *Feeling the Heat* research report, which explored the health impacts of extreme heat on people experiencing disadvantage. The report followed a literature review, a consultation, a community sector survey, and six interviews filmed with Victorians about their personal experiences to create a short film series. It included 21 recommendations.

The report and the videos were launched at a webinar that included a panel discussion with three community health organisations.

Following submissions to separate inquiries about environmental infrastructure and air pollution, VCOSS provided evidence at two parliamentary committee hearings, lobbying for more parks and trees in hot, highly urbanised communities and towns, additional funding for community organisations to provide advice about keeping people safe from polluted air, and better Victorian Government communication about the dangers of smoke.

In partnership with **Jesuit Social Services** and **RMIT University**, VCOSS also delivered workshops to inform community service organisations about the impacts of climate change on staff, clients and communities. These sessions involved scenario workshops in which attendees could plan for future emergencies, and networking opportunities.

Strengthening emergency management

With the interconnected health, financial and social crises caused by COVID and associated public health restrictions, organisations working in emergency management have faced extra challenges in 2020–21, including in supporting the ongoing recovery of communities still recovering from the Black Summer bushfires.

It has been critical to ensure that the community sector was supported to keep delivering emergency management services. To this end VCOSS has provided organisations with trusted and timely information, advocated strongly to government for the sector's changing needs, and developed new forums for organisations to share information and interact directly with Victorian Government representatives.

VCOSS has also worked in partnership with the Victorian Government and our members who have worked tirelessly to ensure that the COVID-19 health and emergency responses were fair and didn't disproportionately affect those already struggling.

Emergency management will continue to be a vital part of the sector's work as the pandemic response and recovery continue, and VCOSS will continue to work for the needs of our members and of vulnerable Victorians.

A fair go for renters

The COVID lockdowns in 2020 had far-reaching impacts across the community, including for renters, many of whom saw their incomes reduced and struggled to cover the cost of staying housed.

The Victorian Government brought in emergency laws banning rent increases and evictions for rent arrears, and reinforcing a tenant's right to negotiate rent reductions.

These laws were initially brought in for six months, but VCOSS and sector partners advocated for them to be extended to March 2021, to ensure that no renter would be evicted into homelessness during a public health emergency.

With support from the **Victorian Consumer Affairs Minister** and the **Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety**, VCOSS ran a series of awareness raising events so sector workers could better support renters to understand and exercise their new rights.

The end of the emergency measures in March 2021 coincided with long-awaited permanent changes to Victoria's renting laws.

Building on the sector engagement model developed during COVID, VCOSS delivered five **Renters' Rights Rundown** events to communicate the changes to key community sector workforces. More than 1,000 people have attended these events.

More (and better) social housing

In early 2020, the Victorian Government announced the state's largest-ever single investment in social and affordable housing in Victoria.

The **Big Housing Build** committed funding to build 9,300 new social housing properties over four years, most of which will be managed by community housing organisations.

The package also includes the development of a *Ten Year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing*. This has been a major focus of our policy and advocacy work in 2020–21.

The *Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance*, convened by VCOSS, has proposed a target of 60,000

The Working for Victoria initiative was one way we helped to profile community sector careers, attract new workers to our sector, and provide some surge capacity in participating organisations at the height of the first and second waves of the pandemic.

new homes by 2030. The Victorian Government's new Ten Year Strategy, combined with a more immediate building program, promises to put Victoria on the right course to meet this target.

The **Big Housing Build** also includes a review of the social housing regulatory system. VCOSS is continuing to lobby the Victorian Government for stronger tenancy protections, and a system of support that's accessible to all social housing tenants when they need it.

Job creation and workforce

Victoria's community services industry employs more people than any other, and can help create thousands of new jobs post-COVID. However, poor pay and insecure funding threatens this growth.

Throughout 2020–21, VCOSS continued to advocate for measures to support workforce retention, attraction and growth.

The **Working for Victoria** initiative was one way we helped to profile community sector careers, attract new workers to our sector, and provide some surge capacity in participating organisations at the height of the first and second waves of the pandemic.

VCOSS successfully positioned our sector as a priority industry. With government wage subsidies and other supports in place during 2020–21, more than 1,100 jobs were created across about 50 community organisations. This was a welcome, albeit time-limited boost. VCOSS will continue to focus policy and advocacy effort on more sustainable job creation and workforce development.

Affordable and reliable energy

Meeting household energy needs and managing cost-of-living issues is complicated enough for anyone in ordinary circumstances, without the additional challenges of an ongoing global pandemic.

In 2020–21, VCOSS's energy-related policy advocacy sought to highlight the connections between various short-term responses to the pandemic and the ongoing importance of basic financial support, fair market rules, and the community sector's unique role in providing practical advice and assistance.

These themes were prominent in VCOSS submissions to the **Essential Services Commission** on COVID measures and broader approaches to consumer vulnerability.

VCOSS worked through the **Victorian Utilities Network** and standalone member consultations to nurture cross-sector relationships and policy collaboration on energy hardship issues. We also provided direct advice to the Victorian Government on the design, implementation and promotion of its support payments and energy upgrade programs.



Formal policy outputs

In 2020–21, VCOSS produced two state budget submissions. The first, *A State of Wellbeing*, was in anticipation of the Victorian Budget being handed down in May 2020. When the Budget was delayed until November, VCOSS released an updated ‘companion document’, taking account of the new context of COVID-19.

Both submissions recommended Victoria transition to a wellbeing economy. They addressed the hardships many Victorians faced in 2020, including those still recovering from earlier disasters like the past summer’s bushfires.

The submissions called for additional resources for the community sector, which was providing vital support to Victorians during the pandemic, while many community organisations were also struggling themselves.

Other flagship VCOSS reports in 2020–21 included:

Feeling The Heat

A comprehensive written report and video interview series detailing the impact of extreme heat on people in vulnerable circumstances and poor housing, and the ways governments and social service interventions can assist.

More than a band-aid

A detailed snapshot of the Victorian emergency relief sector, the vital financial and material aid it provides, and ways the Federal and Victorian governments can simultaneously stop people falling into financial crisis, and strengthen the emergency response for those who do.

Perspectives from the frontline

This consultation report tells the story of social service organisations, their staff and community members affected by the Black Summer bushfires across East Gippsland and North-East Victoria in late 2019.

Over the reporting period, the VCOSS policy team also produced more than 30 formal submissions and responses to various inquiries and public policy development processes:

July – December 2020

Supporting energy customers through the coronavirus pandemic

Submission to the ESC's draft decision on supporting energy customers through the coronavirus pandemic

An equitable and agile VET system

Submission to the inquiry into the Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy

Submission on the ESC's Victorian Default Offer 2021 consultation paper

Delivering a Victoria free from violence

Submission to the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor

COVID-19 and the Community Sector

Submission to the PAEC Inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Keep Going for Gold

Response to the Australian Building Codes Board Regulatory Impact Statement on the Proposal to Include Minimum Accessibility Standards in the National Construction Code

Submission to the National Preventive Health Strategy Consultation Paper

Submission to Victorian On-Demand Workforce Inquiry recommendations

Submission to the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

Advancing an accessible and inclusive Australia

Submission to the National Disability Strategy Position Paper

TAFE: Accessible for all

Submission to the inquiry into Access to TAFE for learners with disability

Submission to the SkillsIQ VET Disability Education Delivery discussion paper

Response to the Second Review of the Premises Standards 2010

Response to the Regulatory Impact Statement for Worker Screening Regulations 2020

We're behind YOUth

Submission to the Victorian Youth Strategy

A State of Inclusion

Submission to the Victorian State Disability Plan 2021–2024

January – June 2021

2021–2026 Victorian Electricity Distribution Price Reset

Joint submission from Victorian Community Organisations

Submission to the Victorian Energy Upgrades: New Activities Consultation

Supporting young children and their families early to reach their full potential

Response to NDIA consultation paper

Response to the Issues Paper for the Victorian Government's Embedded Networks Review

Response to the draft Infrastructure Victoria 30 Year Strategy

Back into poverty

Submission on the proposed increase of the permanent JobSeeker rate

Don't take it as read

Submission to the inquiry into adult literacy and its importance

NDIS access, eligibility and independent assessments

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the NDIS Inquiry into Independent Assessments

A secure and decent living

Build on the Big Housing Build

Submission to Consultation Paper on the 10-Year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing

Submission to the Inquiry into Health Impacts of Air Pollution in Victoria

Submission to the Active Victoria Refresh

Joint COSS submission to AEMC's Access, Pricing and Incentive Arrangements for Distributed Energy Resources draft determination

Submission to the Ten Year National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2021–30)

Submission to the SkillsIQ Draft Community Services Training Package

Submission on the ESC's Victorian Default Offer 2022 approach consultation paper

Submission to ESC Getting to Fair draft consumer vulnerability strategy

The wheels are not going round and round

Submission to the inquiry into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria

Submission to the Victorian Early Childhood Workforce Strategy

Key forums for influence

Human Services and Health Partnership Implementation Committee

The **Human Services and Health Partnership Implementation Committee**, or HSHPIC, is a longstanding partnership between the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (now the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing), VCOSS, and the housing and community sectors.

When the pandemic hit, this strong pre-existing partnership facilitated fortnightly meetings with an expanded membership (the **HSHPIC COVID Response Group**). This group strengthened engagement and planning around the COVID response and recovery, improving outcomes for vulnerable Victorians.

Through the second wave in Victoria the **HSHPIC COVID Response Group** continued to meet fortnightly and take an active role in planning ongoing supports for the community.

Partnership with DET

VCOSS's longstanding partnership with the **Department of Education and Training** was renewed at the beginning of 2021. This partnership formalises our shared commitment to improve learning and wellbeing outcomes for Victorian learners, especially those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

A major focus during 2020–21 was the impacts of COVID on student participation, engagement and attainment, and on student mental health.

Through the **DET-Community Sector Governance Group**, Victorian Government officials and community sector representatives held strategic conversations about inclusive education for learners with disabilities, rural and regional education, mental health and wellbeing, and student re-engagement.

A highlight of the year was the **Community Sector Education Forum** in October 2020, held online for the first time. The theme, 'Resilience and recovery in the context of emergencies and natural disasters', resonated strongly with VCOSS members. Departmental Secretary Jenny Atta, Deputy Premier and Education Minister James Merlino and the Training, Skills and Higher Education Minister Gayle Tierney all participated in the forum. The keynote address was delivered by a young person, Issy Orosz.

Other

In alphabetical order

- Community Services and Health Industry Advisory Group
- COSS Directors
- DELWP Energy Consumer Insights Forum
- DHHS Psychosocial Reference Group
- The Disability Act Review Advisory Group

- Early Childhood Education Reform Stakeholder Group
- Early Childhood Education Stakeholder COVID-19 group
- Education State Guiding Coalition
- Equal Workplaces Advisory Committee
- Essential Services Commission Community Sector Roundtable
- EWOV Community Consultation Group
- Family Violence Steering Committee
- HSHPIC
- HSHPIC COVID-19 Response Group
- Justice Partnership Committee
- Kindergarten Expansion Consultative Committee
- Mental Health Policy Network
- National Consumer Roundtable on Energy
- NDIS Implementation Taskforce
- NDIS Workforce Expert Advisory Group
- Peaks and Statewides Network
- RIMAG Implementation Steering Group
- Roadmap to Reform Ministerial Advisory Group
- Senior Secondary Reform Advisory Committee
- Service Agreement Working Group
- Smart Justice for Women
- Smart Justice for Young People
- State Relief and Recovery Team
- Victorian Food Relief Taskforce
- Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance
- Victorian Peak Bodies Climate Roundtable
- Victoria Summit
- Vic. Utilities policy network





Communicating issues and experiences

Media impact/comms

Communicating with diverse audiences is a key function for VCOSS. It allows the organisation to engage, inform and support members, advocate policy positions, lobby policymakers and powerbrokers, and engage in public debates.

Mainstream media (TV, radio, newspapers, online), the fortnightly 'VCOSS enews' and VCOSS's flagship social media channels (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) remained our key avenues for broad, public-facing communication.

However, the COVID pandemic changed both the *type* of content needing communicating and *manner* by which we engaged with people. Several new forums and communications products were developed across the reporting period in response. These included:

COVID Digital Forums

Held in partnership with the Victorian Government, these online forums communicated information and advice about the unfolding COVID-19 response. Organisations were able to ask questions relating to OH&S, public health, service delivery and other matters. Over the reporting period, six sessions were held, featuring presentations by Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton, the Disability, Ageing and Carers Minister Luke Donnellan and numerous departmental secretaries and officials.

COVID Issues Alerts

VCOSS produced a series of quick-response briefing papers designed to inform government decision-making in response to COVID. The papers were based on the premise that VCOSS cannot offer medical or health advice, but can assist policymakers to ensure necessary public health measures are fair, proportionate and fully inclusive.

'Victorian Voices'

VCOSS struck a partnership with ABC Melbourne to deliver a series of Facebook Live events where community sector workers were interviewed and given a platform to share pandemic information. The sessions were hosted by Rafael Epstein, and translated into several languages so they were accessible to many CALD communities.

'My Corona'

VCOSS commissioned community members to write reflective articles detailing their personal experience of living through the COVID pandemic. Effort was made to capture an accurate cross section of the Victorian community, including representatives of CALD communities, people with disabilities and people receiving income support.

Lived experience

Amplifying the voices of people with lived experience is always an important part of VCOSS's operations, and the conditions of 2020–21 made it particularly vital.

All VCOSS's policy work is informed by and gives voice to the lived experience of Victorians experiencing disadvantage. The *Feeling the Heat* research report is an example of how this amplification of lived experience works at every stage, from the community consultations that informed the report's recommendations through to the filmed interviews that gave a direct platform to everyday Victorians.

VCOSS's media and communications channels also give voice to the lived experience of Victorians experiencing disadvantage. The 'My Corona' series, for instance, featured reflective articles by and about people experiencing COVID-related unemployment, racism, and the extreme conditions of the 'hard lockdown' of Victoria's public housing towers, among others.

This year VCOSS was also in active planning for a 'listening tour' of Victoria, to hear first-hand from people across the state about their experiences before and during the pandemic and their hopes for the future.

This had to be postponed from an April 2021 start date, but the VCOSS staff are looking forward to getting on the road to hear Victorians' stories as soon as public health restrictions allow.

Strengthening the community sector

Disability Advocacy Resource Unit

VCOSS hosts and supports Victoria's **Disability Advocacy Resource Unit (DARU)**. DARU employs three staff, and enjoyed a busy and very successful 2020–21 with many initiatives to strengthen the disability advocacy sector.

Highlights include:

- The **Disability and Disaster Resilience Forum** and subsequent issues paper, which clearly identified issues with and, most importantly, recommendations for change in Australia's disaster response for people with disability.
- The **Access to Disability Advocacy in Victoria** project, exploring access to disability advocacy services, identifying ways to improve the sector so that it is efficient and responsive and people with disability only have to tell their story once to get the help they need.

- The **Improving Decision Support Referrals** project, exploring how to access decision support for people with complex communication needs and situations, and how to work with other systems in a more effective way.
- Work exploring how to improve role clarity between advocates and NDIS workers, to ensure people with disability get the support they need, when they need it.

In addition, DARU also delivered three well-attended online **Advocacy Sector Conversations** forums, monthly peer support meetings for both frontline advocates and CEOs and managers of disability advocacy organisations, and online training offerings on 'How to Be Disability Inclusive' and 'The Human Rights Model of Disability'.

10-year Community Services Industry Plan

The *10-Year Community Services Industry Plan* was created by the Victorian Government and VCOSS, on behalf of the Victorian community sector. It presents a unified vision for the sector and identifies the actions required to achieve it. The plan was formally launched in December 2018.

COVID-19 has presented an opportunity to review the plan to ensure it remains relevant to the sector's changing needs. This work is ongoing across various forums.

VCOSS will continue advocating for the sector, working closely with **HSHPIC**, and using knowledge gained through the pandemic, to determine which actions from the *10-Year Community Services Industry Plan* should be prioritised.



The 10-Year Community Services Industry Plan presents a unified vision for the sector and identifies the actions required to achieve it. The plan was formally launched in December 2018. COVID-19 has presented an opportunity to review the plan to ensure it remains relevant to the sector's changing needs.



Stories into Evidence

Between July and September 2020, VCOSS and the **Future Social Service Institute** (now the **Workforce Innovation & Development Institute**) documented and analysed the community sector's response to the first six months of the COVID-19 crisis.

Interviewing about 100 people from more than 50 organisations, we identified changing client needs and adaptations to service delivery and practice. This information-gathering was conducted as part of a project funded by the **Victorian Department of Health and Human Services** to inform planning for recovery and reform, including opportunities to embed or scale innovation.

Our subsequent report focused on nine main themes:

1. The approaching 'social cliff'
2. Differential impacts of the pandemic
3. Digital service delivery
4. Workplace transformation and implications
5. Rapid increase of high-value, professional collaboration
6. Ethical decision-making
7. Communication and community engagement
8. Faster, more effective decision-making
9. Working with government.

The report found the community sector was impressively agile when responding to the pandemic and associated restrictions, but that extra resources and support were needed so organisations and their staff weren't overwhelmed. It made a number of recommendations for a more sustainable community services sector, noting this can be the cornerstone of Victoria's social and economic recovery.



Working for Victoria

In 2020–21, many Victorians were out of work due to the economic impacts of COVID-19, at the same time as a lot of businesses and services needed help.

The Victorian Government's \$500 million Working for Victoria scheme matched people who needed work with jobs that needed doing, provided wage subsidies to employers, and helped upskill workers for new opportunities.

VCOSS and the **Victorian Trades Hall Council** were involved in designing the scheme, to help businesses keep operating, the economy keep running and as many Victorians as possible find work opportunities.

Community services was identified as a 'priority industry' for job creation, and VCOSS played an integral role in promoting the scheme and providing targeted assistance to members to develop their expressions of interest.

Community service organisations, which stepped up to help their communities through the toughest times of 2020–21, used the scheme to recruit additional workers for roles including food services and catering for vulnerable Victorians, health care support, carer/ community support roles, and outreach for people who were isolated or needed supplies delivered.

At the conclusion of the program, VCOSS produced an *Insights Paper* for the **Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions**, to help inform future policy and program design. The paper drew on insights from workshops VCOSS convened with Working for Victoria community sector employers, as well as workers' insights from workshops

conducted by our partners, the **Youth Affairs Council of Victoria** and the **Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria**.

Regional engagement

VCOSS has continued to develop and strengthen relationships with community organisations across rural and regional Victoria.

Throughout the reporting period, a key focus of this engagement was with community organisations in bushfire-affected areas, as part of the **Bushfire Recovery Project**.

COVID was also a huge theme, and VCOSS worked with numerous partners to better understand the unique strengths and needs of organisations, clients and communities across rural and regional Victoria during the pandemic.

In this regard, VCOSS has operated in strong partnership with Victoria's **Primary Care Partnership** organisations and **Neighbourhood Houses**.

Enhancing sector communications

VCOSS is committed to building 'capacity and camaraderie' across communications professionals working in VCOSS member organisations, through the **VCOSS Communications Alliance**.

As of June 2021, the Alliance had more than 170 active members (an increase of 10 per cent for the financial year). One of the main channels for engagement is a closed Facebook group where participants ask questions, and share experiences, advice, and resources.

In addition, VCOSS ran a series of ad-hoc online support events for communications staff, especially through the extended 'second wave' of late 2020. These sessions were particularly well received by people working in extremely small teams, and at home.

Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance

Safe and secure housing is needed to make every other part of life work, and therefore housing is involved in almost all policy areas VCOSS focuses on.

The **Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance** brings together community sector peak bodies that have a strategic focus on, and expertise in, housing policy, systems and lived experience. The Alliance works together to identify shared concerns and advance systemic, evidence-based solutions.

During 2020–21, the health and economic impacts of COVID and associated lockdowns were a major area of focus: impacts on renting and affordability, on housing insecurity, and on homelessness and the vulnerability to the virus of those experiencing homelessness.

The **Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance** continued to meet every six weeks, to share information and to coordinate effective policy and advocacy. In addition to VCOSS, the Alliance comprised **Aboriginal Housing Victoria**, **Community Housing Industry Association Victoria**, the **Council to Homeless Persons**, **Domestic Violence Victoria/Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria**, **Justice Connect**, **Tenants Victoria**, and the **Victorian Public Tenants Association**.

The Bushfire Recovery Project has built the capacity of organisations to better support their communities' resilience and recovery, championed the needs of those community organisations and vulnerable people who survived the fires, and sought to influence emergency and disaster recovery planning.

Supporting bushfire recovery

VCOSS has formally engaged with communities and organisations affected by the devastating 2019–20 summer bushfires through the **Bushfire Recovery Project**.

With financial assistance from the **Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation**, the project has built the capacity of organisations to better support their communities' resilience and recovery, championed the needs of those community organisations and vulnerable people who survived the fires, and sought to influence emergency and disaster recovery planning.

We published the comprehensive report *Perspectives from the frontline*, while participation in

the program was underpinned by a new Disaster Recovery Bulletins newsletter (400 subscribers) and a series of six online Disaster Recovery Forums (more than 600 attendees).

Work has now begun co-designing a new **Bushfire Recovery Outcomes Framework** for community organisations.

FV Workforce Census

The **Royal Commission into Family Violence** highlighted the need for more understanding about the family violence workforce – its scope, strengths and gaps.

The **2019–20 Family Violence Workforce Census** was an opportunity to expand this understanding, and increase the capability to identify, respond to and prevent family violence.

The census findings, which have now been published, will also be used to improve staff health and wellbeing, recruitment and retention, remuneration and employment opportunities and pathways.

Key findings across all workforces that participated in the census are summarised in an overall summary findings report. A more detailed report will also be available for each workforce, including sector snapshots for broader workforces that intersect with family violence.



Supporting the workforce boom

Traineeships

VCOSS supports the operations of two traineeship programs that bolster Victoria's growing community services industry. These programs especially support Victorians experiencing barriers to employment.

The continued success of these programs in 2020–21, outlined below, has been a testament to the value of working collaboratively across sectors. It also attests to the value of providing ongoing wraparound supports for people – supports that assist in the training and employment components of the programs and also help with more general life issues that could otherwise impact people's ability to stay engaged and complete a traineeship.

Data has shown that participants of these programs gain enhanced resilience and confidence, and establish a stronger identity as part of the community services workforce.

Innovative Traineeship Program

This program is coordinated by VCOSS, funded by **Department of Education and Training** and delivered in partnership with service agencies **Wellways** (Gippsland) and **Uniting** (western Melbourne).

Trainees work in the participating organisations while also completing a Certificate III in Individual Support (Disability) at either **TAFE Gippsland** or **Victoria University Polytechnic**.

The program used a 'supported traineeship model', designed to ensure trainees, workplace supervisors, employers and TAFE staff all feel supported, and can in turn best support the program's 27 trainees.

Several trainees have already been offered further work with their host employer – a significant achievement in the context of COVID-19. Trainees are due to formally graduate in late 2021.

Community Traineeship Program (pilot)

This pilot scheme is coordinated by VCOSS, funded by **Jobs Victoria** and delivered in partnership with **TaskForce Community Agency** and **Youth Projects**.

Its focus is supporting young people experiencing disadvantage and significant barriers to employment, so they can undertake a 12-month traineeship and complete a Certificate IV in Community Services.

The program has a completion rate of over 70 per cent, as compared to the national average of just over 50 per cent for traineeships.

Since 2018, 84 young people have been supported into a traineeship. Fourteen young people have secured ongoing work with their employer. Another three groups of trainees are due to complete their involvement over the coming months.

A key achievement this financial year was young person Tamara Eldridge being a finalist for the **Victorian Trainee of the Year Award**. Tamara was selected from tens of thousands of Victorian trainees to become one of three finalists.

The National COSS network

VCOSS is a proud member of the national Councils of Social Service network.

All states and territories have a Council of Social Service, in addition to the national body ACOSS (the Australian Council of Social Service).

Each COSS is structured and operates slightly differently, under the guidance and supervision of its own board. Our combined network

represents more than 4,000 organisations and many thousands of community sector workers.

The COSS network shares a unity of purpose: to end inequality and poverty. We collaborate on issues of national importance and broad impact. We share information and insights across jurisdictions, assisting individual COSS organisations to perform most effectively.

COVID has provided many new opportunities for collaboration, with joint advocacy in 2020–21 around lockdown strategies, support measures and, more recently, vaccine equity.

Working with Partners

VCOSS is fueled by collaboration and partnerships. Thank you to the organisations who worked with us this year to help advance the goal of wellbeing for all Victorians.



Keeping VCOSS healthy and effective

Inclusion

Building on foundations from the previous 12 months, the VCOSS Inclusion Committee looked at not only how to embed disability inclusion across the organisation, but how to affect behaviour and culture change so that disability inclusion becomes part of how we conduct ourselves at work and beyond, every day.

These initiatives included individual teams watching and discussing real-life case study videos about how to be disability inclusive, and inviting team members to reflect on their learnings from this and what they might do differently in their work.

The Inclusion Committee started work to ensure that all new staff arriving at VCOSS will have appropriate training in disability inclusion. The Committee also worked towards implementing processes internally to highlight inclusion issues, encouraging a culture of open discussion for people to raise issues that need to be addressed.

Workplace health and safety

With the ongoing and evolving development of COVID-safe work plans and policies, 2020–21 has been a busy time for VCOSS's Occupational Health and Safety Committee.

Staff continued to work from home when necessary to comply with Victorian Government directives, and the Committee implemented a range of processes to ensure their safety and wellbeing in these circumstances.

For instance, all staff are required to complete a Working from Home Safely checklist as part of the Safe Work Procedure, and to ensure that their home work space is ergonomically appropriate.

The Committee continues to meet regularly and engage in the ongoing review of OH&S policies according to best practice to ensure the organisation remains safe for all employees, contractors, and visitors.





Vale

We are deeply saddened by the passing
of three powerful community champions.

Vale Kim Sykes

Kim lived her life in service to others. She was a powerful advocate for what was right, and always generous with her time, wisdom and affection.

Professionally, Kim held roles across the public, private and social sectors. She served as the long-time CEO of the Bendigo Community Health Services (2010–18) and as a VCOSS board member (2012–20), including serving as the Deputy President.

Kim's contribution to VCOSS leaves a true lasting legacy. We are so very grateful for her leadership and stewardship, for her insight and dedication to the organisation.

She always worked to achieve what was in the best interests of VCOSS and those we serve, whilst showing absolute generosity and a wonderful sense of humour.

She was truly dedicated to advocating for improved health and wellbeing outcomes for all in the community, and particularly for those who were disadvantaged.

She was a loving mum, a besotted grandmother, a dedicated community member and somebody always able to make you laugh, especially when spirits needed lifting.

Kim will be missed by those who loved her, which is to say all those who knew her well.

On behalf of Victoria's social and community sector, VCOSS pays tribute to Kim and offers deep sympathies to her family and friends.

Vale Merle Mitchell AM

Merle was a compassionate and formidable lifelong champion of equality and stronger communities.

In all her work – from her community-building at the Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau to her presidency of both ACOSS and VCOSS – Merle inspired respect as a tireless advocate for social welfare, in spheres including migrant and CALD communities, income security and service reform.

In recognition of her work she was awarded Member for the Order of Australia in 1991.

In her later years Merle campaigned fearlessly for people in aged care. She made an impassioned and effective case to the Royal Commission on Aged Care and Safety, using the conditions of her own care to draw attention to the need for better treatment and conditions for others.

Merle was also adored as a warm and enthusiastic organiser of social gatherings for extended family and friends, and a much-loved mother and grandmother.

Merle will be deeply missed and her energy, determination, courage and compassion long remembered.

Vale Brian Collingburn

Brian Collingburn was granted life membership of both VCOSS and the Fitzroy Legal Service, with good reason.

Inspired by his own childhood to fight for social justice, Brian campaigned hard particularly for children. He was a prolific letter-writer who threw light on institutional and systemic abuse wherever he saw it.

A member of VCOSS since 1961 and a trustee of the Fitzroy Legal Service, he was active in Parents Without Partners, and in the social service action group formed in 1972 by pensioners and others interested in changing the inadequate welfare system.

Over the years, Brian's efforts extended to issues including the environment, public health, fair taxation, industrial law and occupational health and safety, as well as child abuse, homelessness, and education.

Brian also made a major contribution to draft occupational health and safety legislation that was put to parliament in 1985.

He regularly volunteered at local service organisations and helped prepare submissions to state and federal inquiries and policy reviews.

Brian was a compassionate and energetic powerhouse who will be greatly missed. We pass our deepest sympathies to his family, friends and loved ones.

Treasurer's report

For the year ended 30 June 2021, VCOSS has reported an operating surplus of \$178,914 (2020: \$426,842). This is a pleasing result from our core operations in another year impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The overall comprehensive income of VCOSS for the 2021 year was \$916,051 (2020: \$427,165) and this also takes into account the net market value movements for the year of the investment portfolio established when the Collingwood property was sold in 2018.

It seems so long ago that the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020. It was hard for anyone to predict the extent of the social, health and economic disruption that has occurred since.

There is no doubt that the impacts have been especially severe to those in our Victorian community affected by poverty and inequality and the member organisations who support them. Over the 2021 year, VCOSS continued to focus on member engagement and support, and communications. We know that 2020 and 2021 was when our sector and our member organisations were crucial to the wellbeing of so many people.

I am especially proud of the continued hard work of the VCOSS team in another year disrupted by the various restrictions and other challenges presented by the pandemic. Not only has the work environment been challenging, but it is overlaid by the personal challenges we all faced. The VCOSS team's professionalism and passion for the sector is evident

from the results achieved and difference made during the year.

VCOSS has achieved operating surpluses for nine consecutive years. The net asset position has increased to \$6,062,568 (2020: \$5,146,517). As I have noted in previous years, the sustainability of VCOSS relies on diversified and recurring revenue sources. There is also tight management of our expenses, with reference to the annual budget approved by the Board. VCOSS needs to be financially healthy in order to deliver quality member services and advocate on issues that matter. I'm pleased to confirm that the VCOSS Board agreed to continue to hold each membership category subscription fee, for a further year, at 2016 levels.

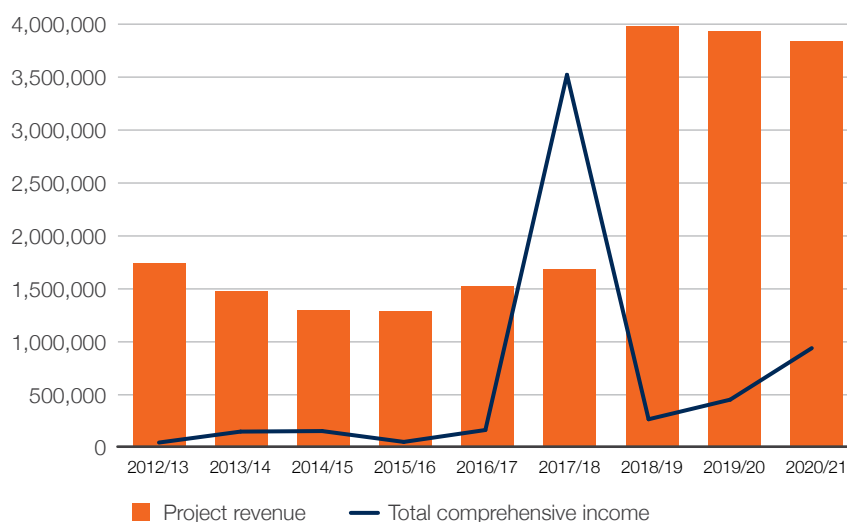
We are fortunate that overall the VCOSS investment portfolio performed well as the general investment markets improved during the year. Research and advocacy in some areas regarding those experiencing disadvantage don't always attract external funding. But the earnings from

our investment portfolio help VCOSS be sustainable and fund advocacy and projects that would not otherwise happen.

During the 2021 year, the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee (FARC) continued to oversee the integrity of the organisation's financial reporting, investment management, internal controls and risk framework. Given the changing environment it was important that we maintained regular meetings and regular reporting. Whilst it was hard, the usual disciplines, like budget setting, still needed to happen.

I also want to thank the FARC and the VCOSS Board, who worked so well together to achieve the positive results for the year. I'd like to make special mention of the significant contribution made by Kim Sykes for many years to our FARC and Board. We were all very saddened with her passing in September 2021 and she will be dearly missed.

The table below shows the trend of project income and the financial sustainability of the organisation through continued surpluses.



Financial Report

Statement of Profit or Loss and Other Comprehensive Income For the Year Ended 30 June 2021

	Note	2021 \$	2020 \$
Revenue – operating activities	2	5,392,461	5,783,942
Employee benefits expense		(1,589,908)	(1,455,842)
Occupancy expenses		(29,083)	(31,437)
Publication expenses		(3,219)	(7,582)
Investment expenses		(34,601)	(31,579)
Other operating and administration expenses		(531,105)	(643,141)
Project expenses		(3,010,205)	(3,167,336)
Finance costs		(18,260)	(26,605)
Surplus from operating activities		176,080	420,420
Interest – investment	2	2,834	6,422
Surplus for the year		178,914	426,842
Other comprehensive income			
Items that will not be reclassified subsequently to profit or loss			
Net fair value movements for financial assets		787,535	(26,494)
Realised gains/(losses) on disposal of financial assets		(50,398)	26,817
Other comprehensive income for the year		737,137	323
Total comprehensive income for the year		916,051	427,165

Statement of Financial Position

As At 30 June 2021

	Note	2021 \$	2020 \$
Assets			
Current assets			
Cash and cash equivalents	4	4,183,520	5,799,899
Trade and other receivables	5	195,553	216,512
Total current assets		4,379,073	6,016,411
Non-current assets			
Right-of-use assets	9	331,870	553,117
Financial assets	6	5,080,168	3,049,126
Property, plant and equipment	7	51,354	79,815
Total non-current assets		5,463,392	3,682,058
Total assets		9,842,465	9,698,469
Liabilities			
Current liabilities			
Trade and other payables	10	646,355	530,082
Employee benefits	13	308,957	275,254
Other liabilities	12	2,336,222	3,059,028
Lease liabilities	9	234,829	217,560
Total current liabilities		3,526,363	4,081,924
Non-current liabilities			
Employee benefits	13	48,875	31,446
Long-term provisions	11	83,273	82,367
Lease liabilities	9	121,386	356,215
Total non-current liabilities		253,534	470,028
Total liabilities		3,779,897	4,551,952
Net assets		6,062,568	5,146,517
Equity			
Reserves	14	1,135,089	344,720
Retained earnings		4,927,479	4,801,797
Total equity		6,062,568	5,146,517



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