

Inclusive communities

Aboriginal self-determination

Significant initiatives

Meeting the State's legal requirements to enter Treaty negotiations

\$21.9m in 2023-24 (\$138.2m/4 yrs) for the state to progress key obligations as part of Victoria's ongoing Treaty Process with First Peoples. This funding will support the state and First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria as the First Peoples' Representative Body to meet Minimum Standards and prepare for Treaty negotiations.

Stronger Families – Closing the Gap by transforming the children and families service system

\$20.9m in 2023-24 (\$139.9m/4 yrs) to reform the children and families system to reduce Aboriginal overrepresentation in child protection and family services.

Continuing the Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Fund

\$51.m for 2023-24 (\$10.2m/2 yrs) to help advance social and economic development, employment and service provision for Aboriginal Victorians. It includes continued investment in the Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Program and the First Mortgage and Community Infrastructure Program.

Major Aboriginal cultural events and awards

\$700,000 for 2023-24 (\$1.4m/2 yrs) to continue delivering major Aboriginal cultural events and awards that empower Community to join together in celebration and remembrance of Victoria's Aboriginal cultures and histories.

What's good

- Victoria is committed to providing formal recognition of the status, rights, cultures and histories of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians through a Treaty process. The 2023 Budget maintains the momentum, ensuring funding is in place to keep Treaty on track.
- The Victorian Government is addressing the devastating legacy of colonisation on First Nations Peoples through its Closing the Gap investment in child and family services. VCOSS welcomes the provision of almost \$140m over four years to support self-determined approaches to address the overrepresentation of First Nations families in the Child Protection system. This funding will enable:

What's missing

- Other sections of VCOSS's analysis describe investments in justice, health and housing. These are important and necessary, but underscore the health inequalities and overrepresentation of First Nations Peoples in hospitals, prisons and homelessness services as a result of dispossession and colonisation. They reinforce the importance of the Victoria's progress on Truth, Justice and Treaty (highlighted earlier in our analysis as a positive significant initiative in this Budget).
- However, they also point to the need for the Government to make investments that enable Victoria to:
 - Raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years of age.

- The transfer of an additional 774 Aboriginal children to the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program
- Expansion of the Community Protecting Boorais trial, an Aboriginal-led investigation team for child protection reports, for 348 Aboriginal children
- Early intervention supports, including Koorie supported playgroups, the Aboriginal Rapid Response service model, and the Family Preservation and Reunification Response for Aboriginal families
- Continued support for the Aboriginal Workforce Fund, business planning resources for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, targeted training packages for approximately 100 sector workers and support for the Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Program.
- Establish a Justice Reinvestment Framework for Victoria and implement justice reinvestment programs.
- Build more social housing.
- Ensure Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are adequately and sustainably funded.

There are other positive investments in Aboriginal health and wellbeing, including social, economic and educational participation across diverse areas of the Budget.

For example:

- The women's health package includes funding for a dedicated Aboriginal-led clinic.
- The 'More support for mums, dads and babies' Budget line spans health care, maternal and child health, and parenting support. Support for Aboriginal families is identified as part of this broad package.
- Funding is provided to continue the Earn and Learn and Aboriginal Traineeship programs in the mental health and wellbeing workforce.
- The Budget advances the statewide rollout of the health-based response to public intoxication, including dedicated services for Aboriginal Victorians and central clinical and referral support services.

Victorians with disabilities

Significant initiatives

From a disability inclusion perspective, VCOSS notes the Budget includes the following funding:

- **Victorian State Disability Plan**
\$3.9m for 2023-24 (\$8.3m/3 yrs) will be invested to deliver a range of initiatives, including (but not limited to) the continuation of:
- Disability Liaison Officers to identify and address barriers for people with disability in accessing health services.
- Funding for the Victorian Disability Advocacy Program to support people with disability through access to advocacy and ensuring equitable access to services, including the NDIS.
- **Supporting inclusion in kindergarten for children with additional needs**
\$4.5m for 2023-24 (\$18.1m/4 yrs) funding to support inclusion in kindergarten for children with additional needs.
- **Accessible Buildings program**
\$5m for 2023-24 (\$10m/2 yrs) to continue to improve access to school facilities for students with disabilities and additional needs. Facility modifications may include ramps and handrails, alterations to toilet and shower facilities and adjustments for students with vision or hearing impairments.
- **Building Better TAFE Fund**
\$26.1m in 2023-24 (\$170.1m/4 yrs) for five projects, one of which is a Disability Services Hub and Student Hub at The Gordon TAFE Geelong.
- **Expanding tax concessions for families providing a home for a relative with a disability**
\$1.2m for 2023-24 (\$5.4m/4 yrs) of foregone revenue to support families providing a home for a relative with severe disability through land transfer duty and land tax relief that will be provided in circumstances where the occupant is eligible to be a beneficiary of a Special Disability Trust.
- **Pathways to home**
\$9.1m for 2023-24 to transition Victorians with disabilities who are well enough for discharge from hospital into home-like settings that are equipped to meet their needs.

Significant initiatives characterised in the Budget as early intervention include:

- **Providing legal assistance and supporting Victorians with disability**
\$7m in 2023-24 (\$14m/2 yrs) to continue early intervention programs and meet demand for legal assistance for people experiencing hardship, including through:
 - Community Legal Centre (CLC) initiatives such as the CLC Family Violence Assistance Fund and early intervention health justice partnerships.
 - Support for people with a cognitive impairment to participate in police interviews through the Office of the Public Advocate's Independent Third Person program.

Notable Budget lines in the forensic space – as distinct from the inclusion space – include:

- **Specialist forensic mental health services**
\$13.5m in 2023-24 (\$81.3/4 yrs) funding to expand the forensic community mental health workforce supporting adults with serious mental health needs who are in contact or at risk of coming into contact with the justice system. This Budget line includes funding to continue the Community Forensic Disability Mental Health Service.

- **Reducing future justice demand and keeping the community safe**

This includes some funding for forensic disability and complex needs services for people with cognitive disabilities who have been in custody, as part of a broader package of measures. VCOSS notes the language in this descriptor is drawn directly from the Budget papers (to assist our members to cross-reference our analysis) and is not VCOSS’s language.

Additionally, we note significant new investment in this Budget for students at specialist schools. These new investments will roll out alongside the Disability Inclusion Package reforms that are currently being introduced in mainstream settings:

- **Fighting for students with disabilities and their families**

\$29.6m for 2023-24 (\$177.4m/4 yrs) for measures including (but not limited to):

- Outside School Hours Care program (provision of “free, high-intensity support” to young people with disability to 30 specialist schools by 2026).
- NDIS Navigators at each government specialist school.
- TAFE Disability Transition Officers to provide specialised and intensive support for secondary school students transitioning to TAFE.

- **Students with Disabilities Transport program**

\$31.9m for 2023-24 to continue the provision of transport assistance for students with disabilities to attend specialist schools.

What’s good

- Stigma, discrimination, exclusion, poverty and barriers to accessing preventive health care have a detrimental impact on the physical and mental health of people with disabilities. As such, VCOSS welcomes continued investment in Disability Liaison Officers to identify and address barriers for people with disability in accessing health services, as well as funding to enable timely hospital discharge. In the next Budget we would like to see expansion of other proven initiatives, such as the model of care provided through the Women with Individual Needs clinic at the Royal Women’s Hospital, as well as increased investment in health promotion and illness prevention more broadly. Looking ahead, we note that new Disability Inclusion laws have the potential to improve access to mainstream supports that address the social determinants of health, and reduce health inequalities. However, this will be contingent on the establishment of a new Disability Inclusion Commissioner with the necessary power and authority to drive change, and future Budget investment in an

What’s missing

- While VCOSS welcomes funding for forensic disability and complex needs services for people with cognitive disabilities who have been in custody, it is disappointing to see no targeted investment into comprehensive disability screening and data collection for people with disabilities at any stage of criminal procedure. Given that people with disabilities are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, implementing a systemic approach to disability screening would inform more appropriate responses in policing, courts, and prison.
- We are disappointed that this Budget has not allocated any funds for the creation of a Supported Decision-Making Service – a proposal advanced by VCOSS in our submission to the 2023 Budget development process. Without dedicated funding for such services, people with cognitive disabilities who can’t rely on friends or family to provide ‘informal support’ are left at risk of being unable to express their free will and unable to navigate complex systems like healthcare, justice and housing.

- appropriately resourced Office of the Disability Inclusion Commissioner.
- VCOSS welcomes new investments in early childhood education, schools and TAFE, which include measures intended to drive greater inclusion in mainstream settings. New funded supports for students in specialist schools are substantial and deliver on a 2022 election commitment that VCOSS understands was informed by the lived experience of families. Measures that increase access to allied health and extracurricular activities and assist with NDIS navigation will make a significant difference for students in these settings. It is important to consider these alongside the \$1.6 billion already going into the government school system through the Disability Inclusion Package.
 - Funding for accessibility upgrades to our transport network is welcome but more investment is needed for Victoria's public transport network to become fully accessible and compliant with our legislated requirements under the Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 (DSAPT).

LGBTIQ+ Victorians

Significant initiatives

- **Delivering Pride in our future**
\$5.3m for 2023-24 (\$22.5m/4 yrs) for initiatives that strengthen the health, wellbeing, social and economic outcomes of LGBTIQ+ Victorians, including:
 - An LGBTIQ+ Community Grants Program
 - Expansion of the Rainbow Tick program
 - Pride in Ageing pilot
 - Bendigo Queer Arts Festival.
- **Priority suicide prevention and response efforts**
\$7.5m in 2023-24 (\$17.7m/3 yrs) to continue universal aftercare services as part of the Bilateral agreement between the Commonwealth and the Victorian Government, and the expansion of LGBTIQ+ suicide prevention and mental health services. Funding also continues delivery of social and emotional wellbeing supports and suicide prevention services through the Strong Brother Strong Sister program for Aboriginal young people in the Geelong region, and the Youth Live4Life program for young people living in rural and regional Victoria.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Victorians

Significant initiatives

- **Delivering commitments to Victoria's multicultural communities**
\$27.1m in 2023-24 (\$77.6m/4 yrs) to build and upgrade community infrastructure, celebrate culture and advance equal rights, protections and opportunities in Victoria.
- **Refugee education support**
\$2.9m in 2023-24 (\$20.1m over 4 yrs) to continue and expand a suite of refugee education support programs that build capacity in Victorian schools and early childhood services to respond to the needs of children, young people and families of refugee background and improve learning and wellbeing outcomes.
- **Supporting our multicultural and multifaith communities**
\$1.1m in 2023-24 (\$6.1m over 4 yrs) to strengthen and extend language provision in Community Language Schools and select government schools.

What's good

- The Government has maintained its commitment to supporting Victoria's migrant and refugee communities by

What's missing

- Victoria is becoming increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. While VCOSS welcomes the continued investment into

continuing, and in some cases expanding, funding for key programs including the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund, the African Communities Action Plan, Community Language Schools and refugee education support. Overall, funding for multicultural policy and programs has remained relatively steady.

- The funding for multicultural organisations, including the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, enables these organisations to continue to support and advocate for their communities. Their work has proved to be invaluable during the pandemic and other emergencies, including the 2022 floods.
- Culturally-specific support to enable improved education and employment opportunities for young people from African and Pasifika backgrounds will be provided as part of a broader suite of youth early intervention initiatives. Funding for community health to continue service for refugees and asylum seekers has also been provided.

Victoria's multicultural sector, looking ahead, we would like to see the Government fund the development of a new co-designed Multicultural Strategy. This would ensure coordinated action across government to engage and support migrant and refugee communities, and strategic, equitable and long-term funding for the sector.

- Racism and discrimination are significant drivers of inequity for multicultural communities. Although funding for anti-vilification campaigns is highlighted, there appears to be little in this Budget to address systemic racism. To enable equitable outcomes for multicultural Victorians, the Government can release the Statewide Anti-Racism Strategy and provide funding to implement all actions.
- Funding for the CALD Communities Taskforce has not been renewed. The Taskforce was a key pillar of the Victorian Government's improved engagement with CALD communities. Cutting the program is a missed opportunity to capitalise on the vital networks and knowledge it generated. Although the Taskforce was focused on helping CALD communities respond to COVID-19, the Government could have extended funding and supported the model to pivot to building preparedness for other emergencies such as floods and bushfires.

Digital Inclusion

Significant initiatives

Service Victoria – delivering digital government services

\$30m in 2023-34 (\$90m/2 yrs) to modernise and digitise government service delivery.

Single digital presence

\$5m in 2023-24 (\$10m/2 yrs) to make Victorian Government information easier for the community to access and navigate on a single digital platform.

What's good

- Digital access is an essential service – and a funding commitment to make Victorian Government information easier for the community to access and navigate on a single digital platform is positive.

What's missing

- These Budget measures tackle just one dimension of digital exclusion. There are a range of other access and accessibility barriers that make many everyday tasks impossible for Victorians on the wrong side of the 'digital divide'.
During VCOSS's community listening tour, we repeatedly heard about the worsening of digital exclusion during the pandemic from government and other services switching to predominantly online delivery. The loss of face-to-face access was highlighted as a key concern. It is crucial that Government provides community sector organisations, such as Neighbourhood Houses, with adequate resources to address digital exclusion in their communities.
It is also important that Victorians have the option to access Government services in-person as both a digital inclusion measure and a social inclusion measure.

Senior Victorians

Significant initiatives

- **Addressing Family Violence for Older Victorians**
\$1.4m in 2023-24 (\$6m/4 yrs) to continue the delivery of Elder Abuse Prevention networks that provide community-based primary prevention and raise awareness of elder abuse in communities across Victoria.
Funding is also provided to continue to deliver the Seniors Rights Victoria support service, including the statewide elder abuse helpline. This service provides free information and referrals, legal advice and casework, advocacy and education on matters specifically related to elder abuse to over 3,600 Victorians aged 60 and above.
- **Better services for older people in aged care settings**
\$34.3m for 2023-24 (\$42.2m/3 yrs) funding provided to public sector residential aged care services.
- **Better aged care services for Regional Victorians**
\$4.1m in 2023-24 (\$162.2m/4 yrs) funding provided to continue the Rural and Regional Public Sector Residential Aged Care Services (PSRACS) Revitalisation Strategy to build three new PSRACS in the following locations – Cohuna (24 beds), Maffra (30 beds) and Numurkah (36 beds).

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What's missing

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Loneliness

What's good

- VCOSS is pleased that the Budget includes funding for community participation programs such as Neighbourhood Houses and Men's Sheds. These programs support the social and economic participation of vulnerable Victorians and can help tackle loneliness. It is also encouraging to see funding for organisations that run volunteering programs, although the investment is modest in relative terms. Volunteering fosters social connection and is a key part of the solution to loneliness and isolation.

What's missing

- VCOSS has advocated for specific measures to tackle loneliness head on. Looking ahead, we would like to see Government investment in a public campaign to reduce stigma and promote help-seeking, and the development of a loneliness screening tool to help health and community service workers identify people who may be lonely or at risk of experiencing loneliness. This could potentially form the next stage of Victoria's investment in social prescribing, noting several trials are underway as part of the implementation of the Mental Health Royal Commission reforms.

Community Transport

Significant initiatives

Delivering Victoria's Bus Plan

\$2.2m for 2023-24 (\$34.5m/4 yrs) funding to deliver bus improvements across Victoria and support other community and public transport services – notably this includes a grant to the VICTAS Community Transport Association (VTCTA) to support the sustainability of the community transport sector.

Multi-Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP)

\$6.5m for 2023-24 to support increased demand for this program and continue the current MPTP lifting fee paid to drivers for wheelchair accessible vehicle (WAVs) trips.

Carer support

Significant initiatives

Critical support for Victoria's unpaid carers

\$9.5m in 2023-24 (\$38m/4 yrs) to continue respite support for unpaid carers, including for carers of people with a mental illness and younger carers.

What's good

- VCOSS welcomes the continuation of funding for additional respite for unpaid carers over four years, which will help support around 5,000 Victorian carers to manage their caring responsibilities.

What's missing

- Around 25,000 Victorians with a Carers Card will no longer be eligible for public transport concessions. While carers in rural and regional areas have benefited from broader changes to public transport costs, discontinuing access to public transport concessions will mean many face increased costs to travel on public transport.
- We are disappointed that a dedicated program to provide employment support to unpaid carers has been discontinued, given this group continues to face significant barriers to labour market participation. The withdrawal of this support will disproportionately impact women.