VOICES of VICTORIA

**Voices of Victoria
Listening Tour 2023**

VCOSS
Victorian Council
of Social Service

Acknowledgements

Many people and organisations contributed to the design, implementation and report on the 2023 Voices of Victoria Listening Tour. Most importantly, VCOSS would like to thank the community members who participated in the Listening Tour, for their generosity in sharing their voices and stories.

The Listening Tour was conducted in partnership with Neighbourhood Houses and other community organisations across the state. VCOSS would like to thank all the organisation managers, project coordinators and volunteers who recruited for, organised and participated in the listening sessions.

The VCOSS 2023 Voices of Victoria Listening Tour was part funded by the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

For enquiries please contact vcoss@vcoss.org.au

About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body for the social and community sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country and pays respects to Elders past and present, and to emerging leaders. We conduct our business on sovereign, unceded Aboriginal land. This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.

Content warning

This report contains information about mental health challenges, homelessness, suicide and family violence that may be distressing. Where requested, we have changed the names of people in the case studies to provide protection for their privacy and identity.

If you need to talk to someone, support is available.

Mental health support

Lifeline: Call 13 11 14 anytime for confidential telephone crisis support.

Beyond Blue: Call 1300 22 4636 for confidential 24/7 support on depression, anxiety and related disorders.

Kids HelpLine: Call 1800 55 1800 for telephone counselling service for people aged between 5 and 25 available 24 hours/7 days.

headspace: Call 1800 650 890 for counselling for young people aged 12–25.

Parentline: Call 13 22 89 for parents and carers with children from birth to 18 years.

Family violence support

Safe Steps: Call 1800 015 188 for family violence support available 24 hours/7 days.

VICTORIA
State
Government

VCOSS acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

Contents

Executive summary

The second VCOSS Listening Tour, which wrapped up in August 2023, is about listening to Victorians who don't often get a seat at the table. It is about meeting them in the spaces where they feel comfortable and empowered to tell their stories, and finding out what they need in order to live a good life.

This is a deceptively simple remit, but what the words *a good life* actually mean is open to interpretation, especially at this specific time as we emerge from the acute years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At its most fundamental level, a good life is constituted by having basic, universal needs met, such as safe and secure housing, food, healthcare, education and a decent job. These fundamentals are the central tenets that VCOSS advocates for in all our work.

Across the course of the Listening Tour, we also heard about other elements of *a good life* that are less tangible but still vital, such as human connection and a sense of community.

Our objective with the Tour is to hear and platform the experiences of Victorians who are too often unheard and therefore overlooked in the policy-making process. To take that aim seriously, it is necessary to treat those voices as the rich source of qualitative data they are; to not flatten out the diverse experiences of Victorians into too many broad generalities for the sake of analytical neatness.

Who we engaged with:

127
people from multicultural communities

8
First Nations persons

43
young people

33
public housing tenants

14
carers

63
people with disability

125
people from regional communities

66
community sector workers

317
people engaged with throughout listening sessions

571
Victorians polled through Essential Media

The report is structured according to overarching themes that emerged over the course of the Listening Tour, such as physical and mental health, housing, employment, loneliness and social isolation, and cost of living.

These are not discrete domains, but rather intersecting and often overlapping ones that should be considered holistically. Someone's employment status has obvious causal relations from and to their ability to cope with housing and cost-of-living pressures, as well as social isolation and physical and mental health.

One of the priorities of VCOSS's wellbeing agenda is for government departments to stop acting in siloed, domain-specific realms and instead take overarching responsibility for all elements of Victorians' wellbeing. We would like to see the common refrain change from 'Does this issue fit into my portfolio?' to 'How can I help with this issue?'

To that end, we aim to draw out the intersections and overlaps between different issues and challenges.

On page 7 there is a 'word cloud', a visual representation of the words that Victorians gave us about how they are feeling.

Much of the space in the cloud is filled with expressions of frustration, exhaustion and even fear.

But there are also many expressions of hope and optimism.

Invigorated **Better** **Alive** **Blessed**

Amidst all the challenges, at every Listening Tour session we heard about simple pleasures:

"What do you need when you get to my age other than good friends and a garden?" Community member, Grampians Community Health

"A good life is being able to help people, and be a part of my community." Community member, Queerspace

"A good life is knowing that when you're down there's someone who'll call up to see if you need something." Community member, Leongatha Community House

Victorians are emerging from the worst years of the pandemic, and they are acutely aware of the restorative parts of life.

People spoke with warmth and gratitude about the sense of community they have found in the organisations where sessions were held.

"Morwell Neighbourhood House has amazing programs and they are the heartbeat of this community because they are community-led, not just telling people what they need. If you want to see what works in community, it's here." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

These organisations are doing amazing work in their local areas, with programs that give people hope and resilience, as well as practical and material support.

But conditions are not easy. Too many people don't have their basic needs met: for shelter, food, health, connection. It is more important than ever to listen to people where they are, to hear what truly matters to them and give people a voice in the decisions that shape their communities.

"It doesn't solve all our problems but at least it's somewhere to go. It gives us access to people, to connection, to feel a part of something." Community member, Akoonah Park Men's Shed

"The community house has made my life up here much better. This house has got a lot of goodness in it." Community member, Leongatha Community House

Where we went
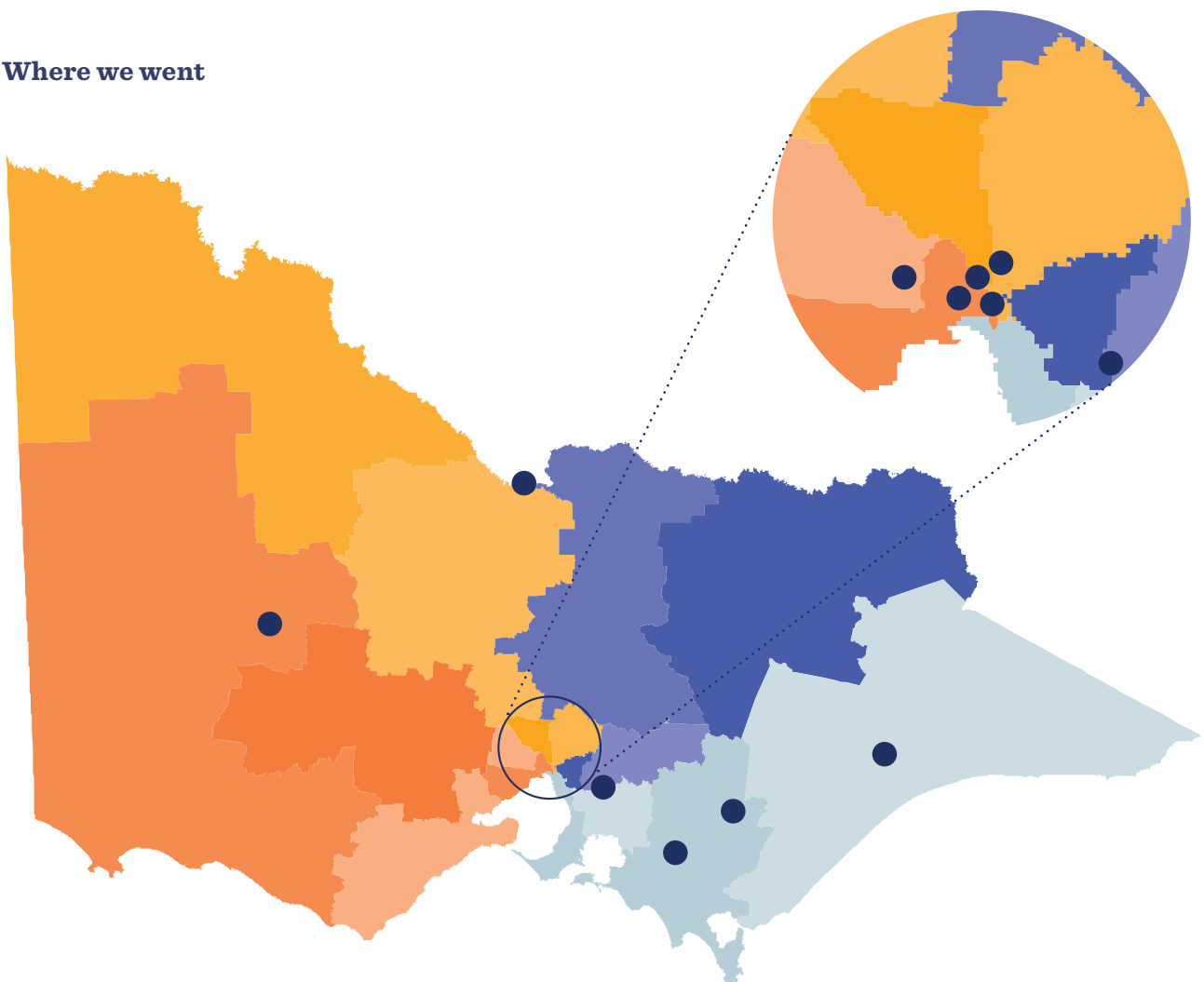
For a full breakdown of where and how we listened to Victorians, see Methodology, p.50.

How are communities feeling about the social recovery?

When we last consulted communities – in the first VCOSS Listening Tour, in early 2022 – the COVID-19 pandemic was still perceived as a dominant threat facing Victorians. A majority of participants in those Listening Tour sessions cited COVID-related health, education, employment and social issues as their most pressing concerns, and 36 per cent of respondents to the follow-up Essential Media poll were still worried about catching COVID.

In 2023, three years into the pandemic and as we progress into the social recovery, the picture is less clear cut.

For many in our communities, COVID-19 continues to loom large, both as a direct health issue and as the proximate cause of other concerns.

Of the respondents to the 2023 Essential Media poll – with which we tested the finding we heard in Listening Tour sessions – slightly more than half (52 per cent) said they were still negatively impacted in some way by the COVID pandemic.

This included concerns about catching COVID-19 (24 per cent), feeling more isolated from friends and community (18 per cent), and experiencing delays in accessing necessary care and support (14 per cent).

⚡ ESSENTIAL MEDIA POLL

52%
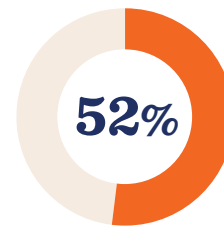
Continuing to experience at least one impact of COVID-19

But for many people, pandemic-related anxiety has been compounded or overtaken by other issues – often by long-standing challenges that predate the pandemic and are now more complex and entrenched.

It became clear through the Tour that many challenges are hitting different communities, and different cohorts within communities, in very different ways.

In Listening Tour sessions we heard that housing stress, cost-of-living issues, access to mental and physical healthcare, and employment are spheres of anxiety that cut across most geographic and demographic axes.

Biggest concerns for Victorian households

Concern	Percentage
Cost of bills including food and utilities	70%
Poor mental health	31%
Low wages/unemployment/insecure employment	30%
Access to healthcare	30%
Access to affordable and appropriate housing	28%
Climate change	27%
Loneliness or isolation	20%
Lack of services for people with a disability or their carers	13%
Children behind or disengaged from education	12%
Experience of family violence	7%

This was confirmed by the Essential Media poll, which found that the five biggest challenges facing people are cost of living, poor mental health, employment worries, access to healthcare, and affordable housing.

When we drilled down into the particulars of people's experiences, even these apparently universal concerns are inflected with different pain points depending on factors such as people's age, stage of life and where they live.

For example, amongst young people, the housing crisis and cost-of-living squeeze are tied up with getting the qualifications they need, making social connections, and building an independent sense of self. We heard many young people express the feeling of being trapped in low-wage and insecure jobs that don't allow enough time or money to facilitate the further study or training that would help them get a better job. We also heard a general sense that the relentless grind of making enough money to live is one significant impediment to young people making and maintaining social connections, and getting the associated mental health benefits.

For older people in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, meanwhile, these same financial pressures are tied up in the challenge to establish a foothold and a secure sense of belonging – both materially and emotionally – in Australian society.

And for many regional and remote communities, financial anxiety is tied to concerns about natural disasters – both recovering from past disasters and preparing for future ones.

This is one example of the ways that issues are differently inflected across different Victorian communities, which in turn flows on to the different services and supports that community members told us they need.

One of the few almost uniform themes we heard, cutting across all cohorts, regions and demographics, is that people are tired.

Whether their major locus of social, economic and health recovery is from the pandemic, natural disasters, worsening financial pressures, or an intersection of all these factors, there is a general sense of overwhelm amongst Victorian communities.

There are things the government can do to lessen this exhaustion, to lighten the load of Victorians and instil a sense of optimism for the future. Communities themselves have plenty of ideas for what these things are.

For that reason, we are extremely hopeful for positive outcomes from this report, and for the benefits that ongoing future listening exercises can have for individuals, families, communities and the Victorian body politic.

**Community responses about how people are feeling right now**

What we heard

Physical and mental health

Being able to get the physical and mental healthcare people need is an important condition for living a good life.

In the wake of the medical and social upheavals of COVID-19, people in Listening Tour sessions across the state told us they are facing many challenges in accessing timely and affordable health services.

This was backed up by respondents to our Essential Media polling, 30 per cent of whom cited access to healthcare as a major concern, including 37 per cent of people over 55.

⚡ **ESSENTIAL MEDIA POLL**

37%

Over 1 in 3 people over 55 considered access to healthcare one of their biggest challenges right now
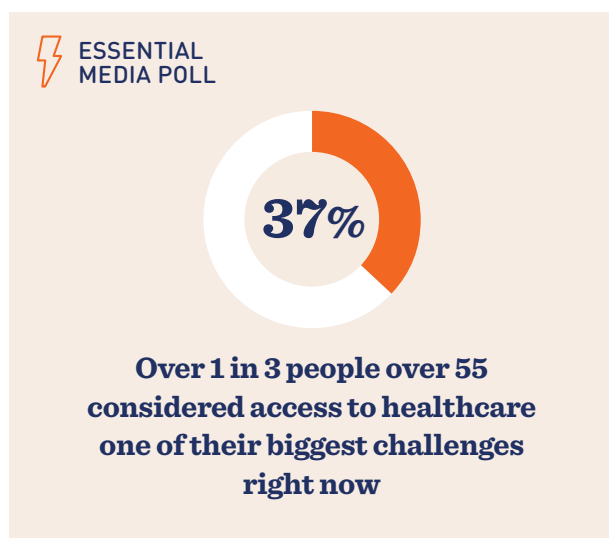
One top-line issue we heard about in every community we visited was access to timely and affordable GP services.

"I was really shocked when I first paid for a GP and I was able to sit there for 20 minutes and be listened to. But I can only afford to do that once a year." Community member, Queerspace

"I spent two weeks waiting to see a GP." Community member, Settlement Services International

"It's very hard to get an appointment. It doesn't matter how sick you are, you have to wait a week." Community member, Leongatha Community House

Other health-related concerns were raised in different communities.

Mental health challenges were among the main issues we heard about from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Many people in these communities spoke of anxiety because of overlapping challenges including recovering from COVID lockdowns, finding employment, facing linguistic barriers, and helping their families to thrive in new and difficult environments.

"During the COVID lockdown our mental health and family relationships broke down… My children became very isolated. Even when the lockdown was ended they didn't want to go out." Community member, Wellsprings for Women

"The majority of us have come from war-torn areas. Even after 46 years I still feel shaky." Community member, Settlement Services International

"I've been looking for a job for years. I have depression because I am so disappointed." Community member, Wellsprings for Women

Mental health challenges were also frequently raised by young people, many of whom indicated that their anxiety is tied to financial struggles, social isolation and a lack of meaningful support networks.

"I'm currently studying and working part time but it's very challenging for me because I'm living on my own and I have to pay for rent, for food, all the living expenses… I want to access psychologists because I'm under so much pressure and stress but we don't have any free sessions and it's really hard for me to afford." Community member, Settlement Services International

"Some days you just can't go to school – you're not sick but you need some time off for mental health otherwise you get sick." Community member, VicSRC

We heard from young people who continue to experience mental health issues as a source of stigma, and who feel there are few if any people they can safely confide in.

"If I could talk to a complete stranger who I don't know. Sometimes I'm afraid to tell my family things." Community member, Youth Projects Sunshine Hub

"Mental health is stigmatised, my friend suicided last year and there were so many car accidents in my local area. The school didn't want to open up that can of worms, so it was never addressed." Community member, VicSRC

⚡ ESSENTIAL MEDIA POLL

51%
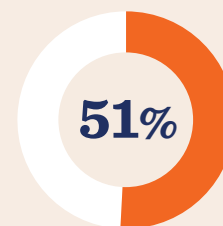
More than half of young people (aged 18–24) considered poor mental health one of their biggest challenges right now

In Listening Tour sessions, young people were also one of the main groups who raised problems accessing affordable and timely dental care.

"Dental care is okay when you're in primary school but when you turn 18 that's it. It's supposed to be for youth, which should be up to 26." Community member, Youth Projects Sunshine Hub

"People can't afford to go to the dentist. People have big pain, infections and things, and there's nothing they can do." Community member, Settlement Services International

In regional communities, the same issues around accessing healthcare were raised but with an added overlay of complexity in dealing with isolation and more limited service availability.

"We have a shell of a hospital. The wards are there but it is empty because we don't have the people to staff it." Community member, Grampians community health

"I turn to my GP for support but it's hard to keep a stable GP here. Regional placements mean they move on so you can't build rapport with them." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

One person at Bairnsdale Neighbourhood House told us they'd gone to a Queensland public hospital to get a procedure they needed because they couldn't get it locally.

Meanwhile, people from LGBTIQ+ communities told us that accessing healthcare is fraught with an added layer of fear and trauma. Particularly for trans and gender diverse Victorians, safe and affordable gender-affirming healthcare is extremely hard to come by.

"Easier access to hormones. There aren't a lot of doctors that do it. I feel like I have to be the doctor – I have to say give me this thing that allows me to live, and if I don't play along with your games I don't get it." Community member, Queerspace

Trans and gender diverse participants reported that their only sources of safe and reliable referrals are peer networks.

"Even to find out how safe the services are. I don't think I've ever been to a service without finding out how safe it is for trans people first. I'll usually ask a friend where they go." Community member, Queerspace

Employment, skills and education

While headline unemployment figures were low over the period of the Listening Tour, not all Victorians have benefited equally from a strong employment market.

In particular, we heard anxieties about the job market from young people, people with disabilities, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Unemployment is consistently higher amongst young people than the general population, with 8.2 per cent of people aged 24 and younger unemployed or underemployed, compared with 3.6 per cent for the general population.

This was borne out in the messages we heard from young people.

"Getting a job is hard. No matter how much you apply for work it keeps backfiring. Even with my youth work certificate people ask for experience but the whole point of working is to gain experience." Community member, Youth Projects Sunshine Hub

⚡ ESSENTIAL MEDIA POLL

44%
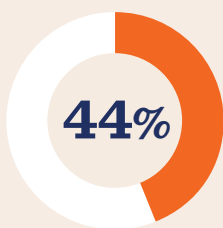
Concerns around employment (low wages, unemployment/insecure employment) were top-line issues for 44 per cent of young people

In the Listening Tour, we heard that acquiring the skills and experience to get a *good* job – one that will allow for a secure and fulfilling life – is even harder. The process of getting a qualification is often expensive, time-consuming, and hard to achieve around the challenges of earning a living – especially in the current rental and cost-of-living crisis. Having a job that doesn't afford someone the time to invest in further study can trap them in cycles of poverty and disadvantage.

"Everything needs some sort of qualification. It makes it hard because most of the courses you have to pay yourself. How are people supposed to support themselves and pay for the course?" Community member, Youth Projects Sunshine Hub

Many people expressed concern about a lack of access to vocational courses, particularly in regional and isolated communities.

"There needs to be more in the area for upskilling our kids so they can get off the streets, give them some dignity to be able to give them what they need." Community member, Bairnsdale Neighbourhood House

It was clear to us in all the Listening Tour sessions that people *want* to work, and that young people want to establish themselves on job pathways that can allow them to live a good life and make a social contribution.

"I want to get a job that I really want to do like working with kids. I want to help wherever it's needed." Community member, Youth Projects Sunshine Hub

Similarly, we often heard that people with disabilities face barriers to getting into the job market, and that these barriers have nothing to do with their ability or willingness to work.

"I love to work. Just doing something. I want to work." Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

We also heard about the struggle to get decent employment from people in culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Many people in these communities spoke about feeling stressed and anxious because of poor English literacy, and the additional burden it creates in securing employment.

"I need to learn to speak English to be able to work." Community member, Wellsprings for Women

They spoke about not being able to access affordable and accessible English language courses in order to upskill for work.

In the Essential Media polling, concerns around employment were prominent for 44 per cent of respondents who use a language other than English.

This group was also twice as likely to continue to experience barriers to employment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Percentage of Victorians surveyed who continue to experience barriers to employment as a result of Covid-19

10%

Use English only

20%

Use a language other than English at home or with close family members

We also heard a high level of anxiety in Listening Tour sessions across various communities about children at risk of disengaging or dropping out of school, and lack of support for these kids.

"My kids used to love school but after doing remote learning they don't want to go back to school. They want to stay home and do remote learning every week." Community member, Wellsprings for Women

"The Youth Space in Morwell lost its funding recently. It's a wonderful organisation. People in the city don't understand the importance of a youth centre here. They're shutting down a fantastic, purpose-built space that supports young people who are disengaged." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

From school students themselves, we heard that the pressure of catching up on schooling missed due to the pandemic was still being felt.

"We are being compared to students from five years ago, but students are different now. It's not fair. I worry that my ATAR is down, but you can't compare 2018 results to 2022." Community member, VicSRC
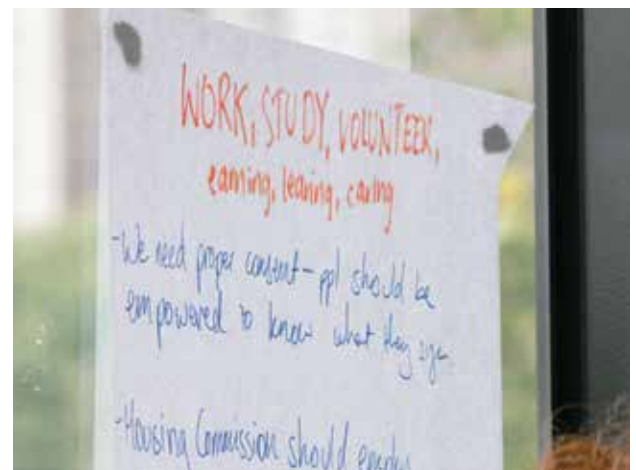
Housing and homelessness

With the rental squeeze and ongoing lack of sufficient social housing – and with that limited stock not meeting the needs of diverse households – housing is a problem for a huge number of Victorians, particularly those in poverty.

At every Listening Tour session, we heard that lack of housing is a major issue making it hard for people to live a good life.

Housing, perhaps more than any other issue, intersects with and impacts upon all other aspects of life.

When people talk about being unable to look after their physical and mental health, unable to afford the rising cost of living, unable to sustain generative social connections, more often than not the housing crisis will be underlying all these hardships.

"Housing is the most important thing. It's very hard to do all the rest if you don't have good, secure housing." Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

"Not having stable housing has impacted my health so much. I can recover but I need proper housing." Community member, Queerspace

Housing stress exacerbates and is exacerbated by unemployment, family violence, disability and poor health.

When people go for long periods without appropriate housing – when they ricochet around the system in insecure and inappropriate accommodation – other problems build. By the time they eventually, hopefully, become securely housed, they often have other complex issues that need to be addressed.

"We need more emergency housing options for families escaping family violence. I've been in an unsafe situation and on a wait list for almost four years. My daughter is not safe. We cannot live like this." Community member, Victorian Public Tenants Association

"It's not a big ask for us as a community to make sure everyone has a home, clean water, enough food. It should be an immediate goal that no one should be living on the streets. We've got enough money in the system that no one should have to sleep rough." Community member, Akoonah Park Men's Shed

For those who have secured public housing, we heard that the quality of that housing and the amenity of public housing estates is impacting their wellbeing, and that they don't feel they have anyone listening and responding to their needs.

"Building maintenance is constantly an issue. There is a sewerage pipe leaking directly into the community room. This is our common space where families congregate and spend time. There are also no working lights in the bathrooms. We've reported it so many times." Community member, Victorian Public Tenants Association

"Housing offices are rarely even open for us to report issues to. Housing workers are always unavailable, they don't call you back and our complaints go unheard." Community member, Victorian Public Tenants Association

We heard that Victorians are acutely aware of the housing crisis on a societal as well as a personal level. Many community members expressed more concern about the lack of social housing for other people experiencing homelessness in their area than about their own ongoing housing stress.

"I'd like to see more community housing. There's such a shortage in Gippsland and too many homeless people." Community member, Leongatha Community House

There was also a broad recognition amongst community members that the housing crisis cuts across different sectors of the housing system – from emergency housing to long-term public housing to private rentals to home ownership.

"We need more emergency housing options for families escaping family violence."
Community member, Victorian Public Tenants Association

"Rentals are incredibly hard to find and too expensive. And people will provide houses that are not up to scratch but because people have no other options they have to move into them." Community member, Leongatha Community House

"If you're in the rental market and you've paid stable rent for 10–15 years that doesn't get acknowledged when you apply for a mortgage."
Community member, Queerspace

In our Essential Media polling, access to affordable housing was a high-level concern for 28 per cent of respondents, including 39 per cent of young people (aged 18–34).

Percentage of Victorians who considered access to affordable and appropriate housing one of their biggest challenges right now

39%
18–34 year olds

28%
35–54 year olds

20%
55+ year olds
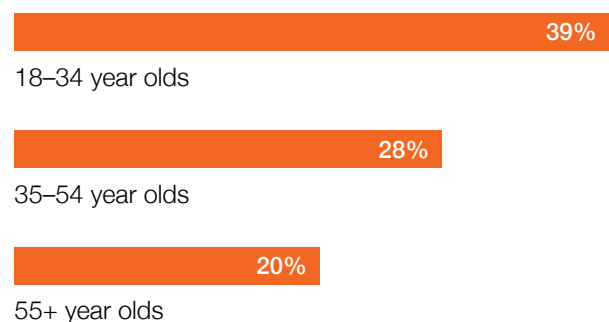
Cost of living

Cost of living, like housing, cuts across a range of issues.

Affording the cost of living means having access to enough food, household energy and medical care to stay healthy. It means being able to afford the textbooks, uniforms and devices needed to send kids to school, and being able to pay for transport to get around.

It means being able to lay the foundations of a good life.

Cost of living was raised across the board at Listening Tour sessions, although with different focuses of anxiety for different communities.

> "Money isn't going as far anymore. People are putting groceries back. Older people are feeling it the most – they are on fixed pensions and have no leeway. Also, those who are chronically unwell, young families. Bills are going up too. Mortgage and rent is going up. Same with the cost of medical care and prescriptions." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

Amongst the young people we heard from, cost of living was raised as a major issue in relation to being able to live independently and afford to study.

> "While you're studying you're getting paid nothing, you're on minimum wage, how am I meant to live on that?" Community member, Youth Projects Sunshine Hub

The rising cost of food is a major concern for Victorians.

> "My dad is a fulltime worker, he works 12 hour shifts and barely has a chance to support our family. We barely have a chance to buy food for a week." Community member, Youth Projects Sunshine Hub

> "My fridge would be filled with food – that would be a good life." Community member, Youth Projects Sunshine Hub

While food affordability was raised as a topic in many Listening Tour sessions, the issue is particularly acute in regional and isolated areas, where community members experience an unfair markup.

> "Food and fuel are much cheaper in Ballarat than here. You can't buy stuff other than at Coles and IGA – the markup is pretty costly. Fresh food especially is much more expensive." Community member, Grampians Community Health

A sense of distrust towards both the private sector and government was often voiced by people in these communities, many of whom are still in the recovery phase from natural disasters and don't feel financially supported.

"What happened to all that money that was raised in the bushfires? We didn't see any of it." Community member, Bairnsdale Neighbourhood House

"Let members of parliament survive on benefits for six months with no frills." Community member, Bairnsdale Neighbourhood House

In other Listening Tour sessions, there were specific cost-of-living issues raised by people with disability, particularly in relation to staying healthy, and having accessible transport options to get around.

"Lower the threshold for healthcare cards. I don't reach the threshold for a healthcare card even though I'm on TAC payments which are significantly less than the minimum wage. The multi purpose taxi program has the same issues. There's a whole set of people who are really struggling but not necessarily on the DSP." Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

"It's expensive to eat healthy." Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

While people on government supports and low incomes are living in poverty, many people expressed anxiety on behalf of those without any support or employment opportunities at all, such as international students and asylum seekers.

"The phrase I come back to is 'If even I can't…' Like, if even I'm finding this difficult how are other people managing?" Community member, Queerspace

In the follow-up Essential Media polling, a huge 70 per cent of respondents cited 'cost of bills including food and utilities' as a top-line concern.

⚡ **ESSENTIAL MEDIA POLL**

70%
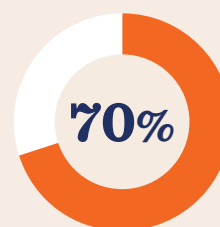
Percentage of Victorians who considered the cost of living one of the biggest challenges for them and their household right now

Disability

People with disability face the same pressures and challenges as other Victorians – including staying healthy; accessing safe, affordable and appropriate housing; and meeting the rising cost of living.

But all these challenges are compounded by systemic barriers that people without disability don't face and might never be aware of.

For instance, only 15 per cent of Melbourne's tram network is accessible to people with disability, despite legislative requirements in the *Disability Discrimination Act* that mean the whole network should have been fully accessible by 2023.

People with disability face significant barriers to employment, with only 53 per cent in a job compared to 84 per cent of people without disability.

People with disability have higher rates of housing insecurity, educational disengagement and justice system involvement.

The stories we heard in the Listening Tour reflect and confirm all these systemic issues.

Wherever we went across the state, people with disability spoke about the desperate need they have for more accessible transport.

> **"Lack of accessible trams is really problematic for people with disabilities."** Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

> **"I'm normally in a wheelchair and I can't get transport to get to work and get around. There's no accessible transport here. That's why I'm moving to Melbourne. If you don't have transport, you sit at home disengaged and lonely."** Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

Many of the problems people described were related to infrastructure: the right trains and trams might be operating, but people can't use them without accessible platforms.

Many people with acquired brain injury also told us they struggle to understand the Victorian public transport app, which should be an informational service for everyone.

Even when people with disability have nominal access to private transport such as taxis, they are often left high and dry because of discrimination – for instance, some drivers won't pick up people with disability or assistance animals – and/or inadequate supply of appropriate vehicles.

One wheelchair user told us:

> **"The other day I was at the hospital. I waited for seven hours, it was at night. I wasn't able to get a maxi taxi. The nurse was really good, she took me back to the ED and I waited overnight till 6 o'clock in the morning for the first wheelchair taxi. I don't think they run at night."** Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

Despite the requirements of the *Disability Discrimination Act*, accessibility of general infrastructure was also frequently raised as a problem for people with disability.

"There are so many places you just can't get into." Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

We also heard about the need for more consistent application of principles of universal design in public spaces, so people can fully participate in society – including people with intellectual disability and acquired brain injury.

"Council has created a new library but there's no quiet space, it's very noisy. For someone like me with sensory overload and acquired brain injury it's hard to get work done. There's no quiet room with a computer. Without a car that's the only library I can get to." Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

People with physical and intellectual disability expressed a need for more community education about the nature and effects of disability in order to advance inclusion, reduce stigma and protect people's rights.

"There's a perception that you've got to be in a wheelchair to be disabled. For lots of us it's invisible." Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

The toll that lack of recognition of and support for invisible disabilities takes on people's mental health was a frequent theme, as was the gratitude in which people hold the community organisations that hosted Listening Tour sessions. The local Neighbourhood House or similar organisation is often people's main source of social connection, material support and comfort.

"This group is really helpful. We can help each other." Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

Loneliness, social isolation and the digital divide

Loneliness, social isolation and digital exclusion are separate but interlinked problems that were brutally exacerbated by the pandemic.

They were raised at most Listening Tour sessions as issues people were struggling with, but with different inflections for different communities and individuals.

Loneliness is the subjective feeling of social isolation. Everyone feels lonely from time to time but experiencing loneliness over long periods of time – chronic loneliness – is linked to poor physical and mental health outcomes.

In our Essential Media polling, 27 per cent of respondents told us they'd felt very lonely in the last month, and for young people (aged 18–34) the figure was 45 per cent.

ESSENTIAL MEDIA POLL

45%

Percentage of young people (aged 18–34) who felt lonely or socially isolated in the last month
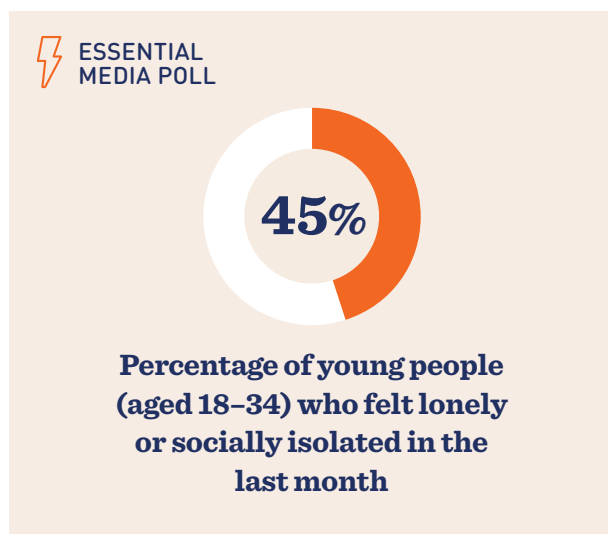
Loneliness was highest amongst Victorians living in inner metro and rural areas.

Percentage of Victorians who felt lonely in the last month

Inner metro	29%
Outer metro	25%
Regional	23%
Rural	30%
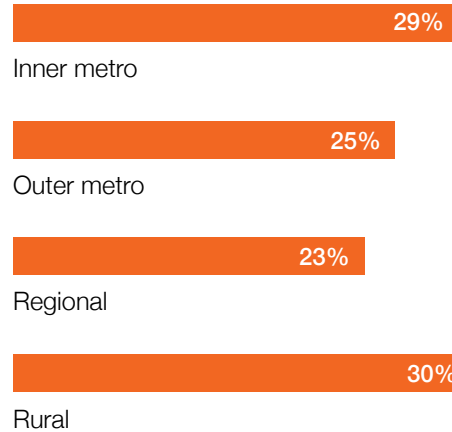
In Listening Tour sessions, people from all walks of life told us they felt lonely. The adage that it's possible to be lonely in a crowd could easily apply to some of the people we heard from – particularly young people, who feel alienated by a lack of safe social networks.

"I have lots of trust issues with people I meet. It's easy to find people to drink and party with but if you want someone to talk to it's hard." Community member, Youth Projects Sunshine Hub

"We need spaces where the queer community can meet and come together. It's hard to find a friend or a partner, it's really hard. I just want someone to have a coffee with, to talk and to laugh with." Community member, Queerspace

In some regional and remote communities, meanwhile, there was a great sense of connectedness within the community – between individuals, families and organisations.

But in these same communities, people expressed sadness or frustration at barriers to physical and social connection, which left them isolated from friends, family, social support networks or the broader Victorian community.

This can be caused by being physically cut off by the lack of good transport options.

"On a weekend the services are halved. My son would like to go to the city but he can't unless he's going to stay overnight, the last public transport is at 5 pm." Community member, Leongatha Community House

"Transport is 100% the biggest issue. Staff have had to pick kids up just so they can participate in youth programs, otherwise they'd have no other way to get there." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

It can also be a product of the digital divide, which was felt particularly strongly by those with a combination of physical isolation and digital exclusion – because of lack of affordable access to devices and the internet, or lack of confidence with the technology.

"It's far easier to deal with a person than an online system. I understand things are going online but it's being managed very badly and government should be doing more about helping that transition for people who find it difficult. Forums like this are great in that respect and could be supported to do more in terms of helping the community." Community member, Leongatha Community House

In our Essential Media polling, a strong link emerged between loneliness and lack of financial security, with 35 per cent of respondents who were financially struggling telling us they were very lonely, compared to 17 per cent of those who identified as financially comfortable or secure.

Caring for carers

At almost every Listening Tour session, there were participants who self-identified as carers – people whose main occupation is caring for a family member, friend, or someone else in the community.

The headline message we heard is that the work of being a carer, while often incredibly rewarding, can be brutally difficult and is not adequately supported, either financially or practically.

In financial terms, carers – most of whom are women, and many of whom have to step away from paid work – are particularly vulnerable to the housing and cost-of-living crises.

"I'm in a local carers group. We had funding where we could go away for a couple of days, you got a break. We haven't had any funding for three years now. Even going out for a cup of coffee and a cake, we just haven't got it now, you need $5 for that and we haven't got it." Community member, Bairnsdale Neighbourhood House

We also hosted a 'deep dive' online session with kinship carers, through Kinship Carers Victoria.

Kinship carers, who provide care to a child or children in their family or social network, face a specific set of challenges. They have statutory involvement with the child protection system, and there was a clear message that information and supports should be more consistent, more proactive in providing the support and referrals people need, and, sometimes, more compassionate.

"One person will tell us one thing and another something completely different. They don't talk to each other." Kinship carer

"You're dealing with so many different people. It's almost beyond people to be able to look after children while doing all that other stuff. Especially for complex cases, there needs to be a quality of worker, a go-to person that can help with everything and smooth the path – help with payments and forms and be with them for court appointments and go down to the police station, someone that's their advocate. You're looking after kids almost on a full-time basis, you don't have time to do all that other stuff." Kinship carer

People were clear that the best support they received was via peer groups, both formal and informal.

"Cath and I have been attending a group which is really a grandparent support group once a month. When we started we were the newbies and there were more experienced people there who gave us advice and good ideas for how to manage things... That was a big help in navigating the system. Now we're among the more experienced ones in the group and we're in a position to return the favour." Kinship carer

Environment, climate change and disasters

People across the state told us that access to nature and a clean environment are important for their health and wellbeing.

Asked what a good life looks like to them, participants said:

"Access to nature." Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

"Better parks and rivers." Community member, Akoonah Park Men's Shed

"More opportunities for connection to green spaces." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

"Having a nature walk that's nearby." Community member, Leongatha Community House

Community members told us that the government should prioritise providing and caring for regenerative green spaces and making sure everybody has a well-kept park nearby.

In our Essential Media polling, just under two-thirds of respondents (65 per cent) indicated that they support investment in parks and green spaces to improve people's health and wellbeing.

In Listening Tour sessions, the environment was also talked about in the context of climate change, which lingered as a compounding anxiety for people when they thought about the future.

Young people we heard from were very clear that they want to be included in conversations about how to deal with climate change and ensure the planet is safe for future generations.

"There's a climate crisis… you know there is so much going on in the world. We are left in the dark, but it is left as our problem. It is our problem, yet we are not engaged in conversations." Community member, VicSRC

Concerns about climate change were most often raised in communities that had been directly impacted by natural disasters, including people affected by the 2022 flooding disaster in Echuca.

For example, many people turned to their local Neighbourhood House after the 2022 floods to provide help including food, information, and emotional support.

> "There is no respect for our future, nature has just been slammed."
> Community member, Echuca Neighbourhood House

> "I'm grateful for the fantastic work of the Neighbourhood House. Without the House we'd have nothing."
> Community member, Echuca Neighbourhood House

In Echuca we heard many voices of anger, frustration and devastation about the ongoing impacts of natural disasters, and about how people had been communicated with and supported in the lead-up and the aftermath.

> "We had no support in a time of need – before, during and after. The community will take years to recover, we were given 10 minutes to evacuate... About 50 people lost their homes near me and we could have saved these." Community member, Echuca Neighbourhood House

In other communities we heard from people who are still experiencing the effects of natural disasters that happened years or sometimes even decades before.

Community members in Bairnsdale were exhausted from coping with floods, bushfires and then the COVID-19 pandemic, with little time to properly recover.

> "This is a community coping with the impacts of the bushfires and there were floods before that. People are really tired." Community member, Bairnsdale Neighbourhood House

Community stress and suffering in the wake of disasters is acute and sustained.

People were grateful for the hard work of community services in helping them recover.

Climate change was also talked about in the context of Victoria's transition to net zero emissions.

Decarbonisation, which is needed to mitigate the impacts of global warming, brings upheaval as some industries wind down and others boom.

This disruption was particularly felt in the Latrobe Valley, which has long been dependent on the jobs created by coal mines and coal-fired power stations that have no place in a clean energy future.

There was optimism among residents, however, about the opportunities the region could seize by ensuring a just transition and becoming a hub of clean energy and green skills.

> "Climate change is top of the agenda. Enviro Vic are doing a good job in the Latrobe Valley because they recognise that a just transition, including opportunities with renewables, is essential." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

> "We need to listen to the science, find our voice and get moving on new opportunities." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

> "A good life would be a just transition in the valley." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

Key findings

People are struggling to access the services they need

There is a sense of pessimism and even fatalism in many Victorians communities about the shortage of public housing, public health and dental, public transport, aged care and disability services.

Service systems are so stretched that people sometimes travel extreme distances to get the help they need, or simply give up on getting it.

There are low levels of trust towards government, businesses and institutions, and often high levels of anger

This is fuelled by inequality, and by the sense that people are not listened to or treated with respect by systems and services supposed to be there to help.

Loneliness and social disconnection remain major issues for many Victorians

Loneliness, isolation and disconnection are serious problems that were exacerbated by the pandemic, and are now chronic issues for many Victorians.

For people who don't engage much with the internet – whether because they don't have reliable access, lack technical confidence, or just through choice – our digitally-connected world has never been so atomised and disconnected.

Local people have strong and embedded knowledge of what their communities need

There is a wealth of untapped civic ideas and commitment in many communities.

People value being listened to about their needs and priorities, and being given a voice in policy-making processes to solve their own local problems.

Local leaders, networks and organisations hold their communities together

There is a cadre of local champions across Victoria. Some of them work in community organisations, some in religious organisations or community groups or libraries.

These local champions do a huge amount for their communities and keep many people afloat.

But they are working at capacity and suffering burnout. They need support, recognition and adequate working conditions.

Government also needs to be mindful not to exploit people whose strong community connections can lead to voluntary work that should be recognised and paid – such as leaders from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Community ideas for community problems

Invest in green spaces for communities.

"More community gardens and urban gardens." – Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

**A 'lend a hand' campaign where people could offer help to their neighbours.**

"Even if we had T-shirts or something – or a tattoo across the forehead! – so people could feel comfortable to come and say 'can you help me with this?'" – Community member, Grampians Community Health

Invest in 'welcome networks' to recruit and retain foreign-trained doctors and professionals into regional communities.

"Government incentives to get medical staff – doctors and nurses – to move out here." – Community member, Leongatha Community House

Invest in accessible public transport infrastructure, including handles to assist people getting on and off trains.

"I'm a train user and I find the distance between the train and the platform… We need a handle on the outside of the train or just on the inside. The gaps are like this [indicating with hands], the steps are too deep and too wide." – Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre
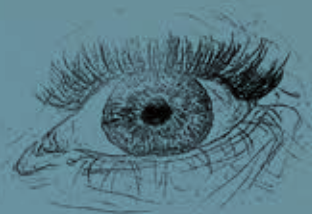
Encourage programs fostering intergenerational care and interaction.

"Intergenerational care. There are so many lonely elderly people and young people without grandparents." – Community member, Grampians Community Health

Invest in youth support and mentoring programs.

"When you have people around you who know what you're going through, maybe someone who's dealt with that in the past. You can trust them because they've had that experience." – Community member, Youth Projects Sunshine Hub

Make sure everyone has access to the internet.

"We've moved to a digital world so everyone should have access to the internet for free. If you're only going to put information online, then make sure everyone can see it." – Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

Maintain local newspapers.

"When I came to this town the paper kept the community connected. Now I feel as if I'm incommunicado... I do miss the connection of a local paper." – Community member, Grampians Community Health

Provide better mapping and publicising of amenities such as defibrillators and public toilets.

"You should advertise where the defibrillators are. Just a sign stuck to the wall outside saying there's one in here so you know where to go." – Community member, Akoonah Park Men's Shed

Future directions

The messages we heard from Victorians across the state were not couched in policy terms.

People didn't speak in formal recommendations or with a specialist vocabulary.

They didn't always delineate things like levels of government with their different jurisdictional mandates.

But without the need for too much analytical overlay, people did tell us about a number of clear future-focused social aspirations: ideas that cut across geographic and demographic lines and speak to the society Victorians would like to live in.

People who shared their stories want to know that their voices will go into policy and advocacy formation. And doing justice to people's lived and living experience is a dual imperative: both evidence base and process driver for the development of effective social policy. These stories – and the overarching themes they reveal – can direct our work towards its best ends, and can help guide the work of government as well.

Interspersed with personal stories from Listening Tour participants we interviewed across the state, we have synthesised what we heard into seven 'future directions'. They aim to point towards the society of people's aspirations, towards the elements of equity and opportunity people currently feel are missing. Towards a fair chance at a good life for all Victorians.

Future direction 1
Strengthen the investment in public services

Future direction 2
Ensure services are inclusive and accessible to all

Future direction 3
Invest in early and holistic interventions that build community resilience and inclusion

Future direction 4
Engage in deep listening, consider lived experience in policy making, and place people at the centre of service systems

Future direction 5
Foster community connection and social infrastructure to combat loneliness, isolation and disconnection

Future direction 6
Support local community-based networks, interventions and policies

Future direction 7
Support the community sector organisations and workforce that support people through hard times

Future direction 1
Strengthen the investment in public services

Although there has been major investment in public services over recent terms of government, a host of external stressors – including population growth and the health and social crises of COVID-19 – have combined with pre-existing pressures to create an environment where Victorians struggle to access the services they need to live a good life.

At Listening Tour sessions, we heard about particular points of pressure in different regions and contexts: local healthcare in regional communities, accessible public transport for people with disabilities, training and education pathways to help young people realise their goals.

Across the board, further investment in public services will enable better outcomes – in physical and mental health, public transport accessibility, public education, housing, employment, disability services, the environment and more.

Funding shortfalls can mean that existing infrastructure for vital programs and services doesn't get utilised. We heard about a TAFE building standing empty in one regional town, an understaffed hospital standing largely unused in another. We heard about accessible trams without the platform infrastructure that would allow people who need them to use them, and about young adults not being able to enrol in courses on the free TAFE list because they can't afford the time to study.

> "It seems since the pandemic a lot of our local services and groups have gone, they've been closed."
> Community member, Bairnsdale Neighbourhood House

> "We live in a rich country, but everything is so hard."
> Community member, Victorian Public Tenants Association

All these perverse outcomes are the result of decades of under-funding, at all levels of government.

The idea that private markets can or will fix Victoria's pressing social problems has been thoroughly disproved on the ground, in market failures as starkly evident as the housing crisis and the shortage of early childhood education and care.

To create a state where everyone has a chance to thrive, there needs to be adequate, secure and ongoing funding of the services Victorians need to live a good life.

We saw during the Listening Tour how strong investment in services and supports can work to break cycles of poverty and disadvantage. It is having an impact, for instance, in the Latrobe Valley, where Government has responded to community need by funding tailored health and social services programs (see Future direction 6, p.45). These programs are designed and run in partnership with the community and with an inclusive early investment lens, as discussed in our other future directions.

Molly's story

"The development of the town has been very slow."

Molly is a young person studying for her Diploma of Community Services.

Born and raised in Leongatha in Victoria's South Gippsland region, she's strongly invested in that community but has to travel untenable distances for her course, or relocate to the city.

She says, "Having to travel to classes is really difficult financially."

But finding affordable housing in Melbourne is also proving almost impossible.

"I've been trying to apply for houses since November… last week we applied for three."

With apparent understatement, she says, "The condition of the houses hasn't always been consistent."

Nonetheless they all attract huge numbers of applicants.

"Every house inspection we go to there's at least 30 people there and all desperate. They wouldn't even care (about the condition of the house), they wouldn't ask questions, they'd just apply. You can just see how desperate they are."

Molly would love to be able to live and study in her home town, but she can see that the lack of local educational opportunities is just one of the ways the town is losing its anchors for young people like her.

"We do have services but those are overlooked and not upkept with requirements."

Molly identifies a vicious cycle whereby the exodus of local young people exacerbates a lack of local services such as healthcare, which in turn stops other people from establishing roots in the town.

"We have nothing open on the weekends for young people to come down here, move down here and help out with things like having GPs here.

"A lot of the time we have shops come here and then they go away within a few months so there's so many empty shops around and there isn't many people who want to come here and stay here, so the development of the town has been very slow."

Molly wants to see initiatives that would bring people back to the town. Her ideas are concrete and realistic.

"Having more community development such as… festivals, anything similar to that which could bring people in.

"I think having a specific nature walk would be really great. We do have one [nearby] but that's currently overgrown, the bridges have collapsed and there's weeds everywhere, you can't find the track, and it's been really sad because a lot of people would go there."

Molly wants to be part of a revitalised local community, bringing more "reasons for people to enter the town and stay here."

Future direction 2
Ensure services are inclusive and accessible to all

For public services to work for all Victorians – especially the people and communities who need them most – there needs to be consistently-applied awareness that not everyone can access services in the same way.

People with disability, First Nations people, those from LGBTIQ+ communities, people who are culturally and linguistically diverse, and those on the wrong side of the digital divide all have specific access needs and barriers.

And they all have a right to access services, including public transport, healthcare, housing and aged care, and public information.

Planning and designing inclusive services means fulfilling Victoria's legislative requirements to make all public transport and infrastructure 100 per cent accessible to people with disability.

It means actively working against discrimination and building inclusion; for instance, by making reasonable adjustments to physical spaces and information for people with neurodiversity and intellectual disabilities.

It means promoting digital inclusion, and recognising that some services can't be taken online. People need to retain the human connections that are vital for human-centred services.

> "The only communication is through social media. If you don't have access then you don't have any emergency information." Community member, Echuca Neighbourhood House

It means improving culturally appropriate communication and engagement with people who don't have English as a first language.

> "My parents have limited English which is an extra barrier. They rely on their children. For people who are recently arrived they wouldn't even be able to do that, so that's a big issue for CALD communities."
> Community member, Settlement Services International

And it means continuing the work to build culturally safe mainstream services, including for First Nations Victorians and LGBTIQ+ communities.

Providing safe and inclusive spaces works to bring people in from the margins and help them stay connected and well. We know this because we visited many such spaces over the course of the Listening Tour – see for instance our summary of the Listening Tour session at Jika Jika Community Centre,[1] which is an inclusive space for the whole community, including many people with disability and acquired brain injury.

1   https://vcoss.org.au/listening-tour-2023-sessions

Jun's story

"I feel exhausted, dealing with the way people treat me."

Jun* is an intersex, non-binary trans woman who recently moved to Melbourne from Adelaide.

Part of the reason they moved was to find somewhere inclusive and accepting to live, but so far it has been a struggle.

"Being in public is the hardest thing for me," they say. "People constantly harass me – in the street, on the tram, everywhere.

"When I dress in feminine clothes, I get harrassed, when I dress in masculine clothes, I get harrassed – I have to dress in very neutral clothes and hide myself… I feel exhausted, dealing with the way people treat me."

Jun's gender identity has also made it hard to access education, employment and healthcare.

"I'm unemployed. I studied at TAFE but that was a pretty unpleasant experience for me. No employer took me on afterwards. Businesses say they are inclusive, and they have inclusion policies but that doesn't mean anything."

About trying to access the healthcare they need, Jun says, "I feel tossed around like a volleyball. One place will refer you somewhere and then they'll tell you they can't help and refer you on somewhere else."

Jun hasn't been able to find support in any mainstream mental health services. One LGBTIQ+ peer support service, QLife, has been helpful.

Jun advocates for better public education about the issues intersex people face, more inclusive healthcare, and more social supports.

"Intersex people need more support and guidance to help with their identity journey. Having a mentor when you're on hormone medication would be useful – they could help you transition and not leave you to fend for yourself."

A good life for Jun looks like:

• Being able to make a meaningful, worthwhile contribution to the community.
• Being valued.
• Helping people.
• Being able to afford to live independently.

For now, just being able to take part in society would be an improvement.

"I feel excluded from most places. Being intersex is complicated and I'm tired of it."

* Name has been changed

Future direction 3

Invest in early and holistic interventions that build community resilience and inclusion

In communities we visited throughout the Listening Tour, people spoke about local problems in a way that highlighted the links between apparently disparate social issues, and a recognition of the need for genuinely early interventions to prevent crises.

Our Essential Media polling backed this up, with 70 per cent of respondents agreeing with the idea that 'the government should spend money to address the root causes of social inequality (such as affordable housing and secure income), rather than react to the problems they cause'.

"When we intervene earlier, we prevent acute spend. The solution to many problems is in community voices." Latrobe Health Assembly Executive Officer

"Leongatha needs more youth services. Kids want to hang out with other kids. They need to find an old building somehow and give it to the youth, let them graffiti it if they want to but just somewhere they can be. We need to look after our youth." Community member, Leongatha Community House

"I'm a psychologist but mostly people don't need psychology, they need housing. Then they would have a lot fewer issues to deal with. Housing problems make physical and mental health things so much worse." Community member, Leongatha Community House

The Victorian Government has a structure in place to implement early intervention approaches, in the Early Intervention Investment Framework (EIIF).

The EIIF will be most effective if it is enabled to implement holistic and cross-portfolio interventions.

This means recognising that preventing someone from becoming chronically ill might involve improving their housing situation, as well as providing reliable healthcare.

It means preventing young people from coming into contact with the justice system by addressing root causes of the problems that lead them there.

It also means investing in community building, which creates the formal and informal support networks that can help people when there's a crisis such as COVID.

Service systems can't work in isolation and can't be fixed in silos.

Genuinely early and cross-portfolio investment has the potential to improve people's lives and prevent costly crises before they occur.

Lita's story

"Not having stable housing has impacted my health so much."

Lita* works as a disability advocate for women in regional Victoria, when she can. She also spends much of her time caring for her elderly mother.

But Lita herself has chronic illness and multiple disabilities. "I'm immuno-compromised, have a lung condition, three spinal conditions, water diabetes and EDS (Ehlers-Danlos syndrome)."

Managing her health is a constant challenge, and she finds navigating the NDIS "draining" and frustrating.

But her biggest challenge right now as a person with chronic illness and disabilities is finding safe, secure and accessible housing.

"I've applied for literally thousands of houses and have been denied because I need too many modifications to the property – I face discrimination constantly and have no safe, healthy and accessible options for housing."

Lita's complex health problems disastrously impact her housing problems, and vice versa.

"In the 2019 bushfires I had to move to Queensland because I couldn't breathe because of my asthma and lung condition. I came back to Melbourne but then had to move to the NT during the pandemic because of my immune condition. Now I have a really poor rental history because I've moved around a lot and face additional barriers to getting appropriate housing."

And appropriate housing is one of the fundamental things Lita needs to regain her health.

"Not having stable housing has impacted my health so much. I can recover but I need proper housing… I got one of my disabilities from a house I lived in that was full of mould under the carpet. I tried to get the real estate to do something for years but they wouldn't listen… Mould and dampness is only going to get worse with the climate."

Lita's struggle to find safe and stable housing also has a cruelly circular impact on her ability to access the healthcare she needs to get well.

"I've had to restart my public health waitlist over and over again every time I move out of a catchment area, which is quite often because I don't have stable housing. What about homeless people? There should be a database for public health waitlists so you don't fall off every time you relocate."

Lita says a good life looks like:
- Managing my own health well.
- Recovering from my health trauma.
- Being supported to care for my family.
- Being a part of my community.

* Name has been changed

Future direction 4

Engage in deep listening, consider lived experience in policy making, and place people at the centre of service systems

Across Victoria, people expressed low levels of trust and often high levels of anger.

Government is not the only target of distrust and anger; we often heard it directed towards big businesses and other perceived vested interests – including telcos, banks and supermarkets.

But in every manifestation, the anger is related to inequalities people feel and see, and to the sense of there being no one to whom they can directly communicate their needs.

People across the state told us of frustrating and alienating systems through which government and other institutions provide services. They told us that what they need in their services are human interactions, not online or automated ones.

What people want is perhaps best summed up in this short statement from a community member:

> "We need a system that listens to you." Community member, Akoonah Park Men's Shed

This means providing person-centred services that can interact respectfully with people who are often at their lowest ebb when they need help.

And it means actively listening and responding to community needs, through genuine co-design that empowers people to have a say in the systems and services that shape their lives.

Many people told us that taking part in the Listening Tour was the first time they felt that their voices, ideas and opinions had been sought or heard by policy-makers.

The overwhelming response we received was gratitude. People came away from Listening Tour sessions feeling hopeful and inspired (see Evaluation, p.55).

Government can provide further opportunities for people to have their voices heard *where they are*.

This will build trust in government, empower people to form community connections and be part of local decision-making processes, connect people to local services they need, and help government stay connected to the genuine needs and priorities of diverse communities.

> "It's very hard to improve your life. The system doesn't help you get back on your feet. The system keeps you down, holds you down, and you can't get ahead." Community member, Victorian Public Tenants Association

> "They try and put everything in boxes but that's not how humanity works. We need a human on the other end to talk to. We need a bit more individual attention." Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

Diana's story

"Help people like me."

In January 2023 when Diana* was asleep in her bed around 4am, her then-partner tried to kill her by setting her home on fire.

Diana managed to escape, but she lost everything except the pyjamas she was wearing and a handbag.

In the wake of this terrible trauma, Diana has a strong message she wants government to hear.

"The system is not smooth. It's hard for people like me."

Diana says she feels "utterly blessed" for the help she's received from her local Orange Door and from Berry Street Family Services. And her local Neighbourhood House was a key source of support, providing her with clothes, friendship and support when she had nothing.

As a victim of crime, Diana is going through an application for financial assistance through the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT).

But she has been distressed and disappointed at how slow and unhelpful the VOCAT application process has been.

"Victims of Crime Tribunal can take years before (your case) reaches the court," she says. "Why is it going so slow? If there are too many victims out there they need to get more legal help. If they're not getting enough legal help, why not? Not enough funding? Then we need to put more there."

An important part of her message is about how community members are treated by government services that are set up to help people at the toughest of times.

"They treat you like a dot. Not even a number yet, not even a name. Not like a human, there's a long way to go before you get to that point."

Diana says it was only through "pot-luck" that she eventually discovered she could receive intermediate help to assist her with the basics while her application is before VOCAT.

"There's things that I need, and if I have to wait for years when I've lost everything…"

She cites things like arch supports to help her walk – "I've lost my car, it melted in the fire, so I have to do a lot of walking."

She even lost her mouth guard. "I grind, I've already cracked two teeth."

Knowing she had access to intermediate help could have saved Diana pain and stress in the immediate aftermath of the attack.

Victim-survivors need to be proactively connected to services and given vital information to help them through the process.

"I was upset that the lawyers didn't explain it to me, they left me pot-luck to find out how," Diana says.

"And there are people that are probably worse than me too, I'm lucky my health is still alright."

Diana's message could not be clearer.

"I want them [government] to be aware so they can help make changes to help people like me."

"They need to actually help victims, to understand and get the help they need. I think it needs to be looked at because I'm just one of millions of people… I think the government should look at it to make it smoother for all of us."

* Name has been changed

Future direction 5

Foster community connection and social infrastructure to combat loneliness, isolation and disconnection

Disconnection is a theme that runs through many of the problems we heard about from communities.

Loneliness and social isolation are a big part of this issue. They are long-term problems that were exacerbated by the pandemic and still shape the lives of many Victorians. More than a quarter of respondents to our Essential Media poll (27 per cent) said they had felt very lonely in the last month.

For other people, disconnection is related to digital or linguistic exclusion, mental or physical illness, or simply not having the accessible transport to get them into the community.

To help ease these widespread problems of disconnection, there are established Victorian organisations and programs that act as hubs of human connection.

They include Neighbourhood Houses, community health organisations, libraries, council-run parents groups and youth groups, as well as organisations such as Scouts and Girl Guides.

These hubs provide a lot more than their traditionally understood primary service.

"People rely on Morwell Neighbourhood House for information, food, a safe place, a warm place, somewhere to hang out." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

Libraries, for instance, aren't just repositories of books and DVDs. Many people who are disconnected by the digital divide use libraries to get help accessing the internet, navigating online government services and printing out documents.

Neighbourhood Houses provide translation services and English classes for people disconnected by linguistic barriers, and are the main source of social connection in many people's lives.

Groups and community spaces provided by community health organisations and other place-based services provide the intensive human connection that can be a lifeline for people who use alcohol or other drugs, those seeking to reduce their harms, and people on a recovery journey, complementing the work of specialist AOD support services.

From help with digital literacy at libraries to intensive recovery-focused case work at community health organisations, there is a wide spectrum of needs being met by these organisations.

They are responsive and embedded in communities, staffed by dedicated people who do the best they can to meet Victorians' needs in a society where so many forms of disconnection are causing complex social problems.

But the infrastructure for this vital community connection work is ad-hoc and inequitably distributed. People use whatever programs, services and supports are available in their local area. If there isn't an accessible local library people might not be able to get their vaccination certificate printed or access Centrelink services. If there is only one community health case worker servicing their vast regional area, some people won't get the support they need to stay sober.

In order to give all Victorians the community connections to thrive, there is a need to properly map and quantify the state's vital social infrastructure, to understand where there are service deserts and how pre-existing infrastructure – connection hubs – can be supported to help more people.

And there is a need to invest more in this equitable social infrastructure, to allow all Victorians the connections they need to thrive.

This need was supported by the results of our Essential Media polling, with two-thirds of respondents (67 per cent) supporting 'investment in local social services (e.g. at neighbourhood houses or community centres) to prevent loneliness and isolation and foster community connection'.

Koby's story

"Even if we had T-shirts or something – or a tattoo across the forehead! – so people could feel comfortable to come and say 'can you help me with this?'"

Koby is a Ngarrindjeri man living in a small town called Willaura, which has a population of around 500, near Ararat.

During the pandemic Koby, who's gay, experienced the trauma of his partner's death from COVID. After "watching him wither away", Koby turned to alcohol and other drugs to cope with his grief in the midst of the lockdowns.

He says, "I think it's important to talk about this because it's the truth. There's a lot of things that happened during COVID that led a lot of people to drink and go to other drugs."

What helped pull Koby out of the hole was his local community organisation – particularly the personal support he received from a case worker there.

"If it wasn't for things like Grampians Community Health… It got me through it, the home visits. I'm blessed that I could actually get past that during COVID."

Koby has come out of his experience with a strong voice of advocacy for his community, and for the services that helped him survive.

"The problem is that I know for a fact our case manager, there's only one, and she covers a 42,000 square kilometre area. And they're talking about cutting funding. So I'm actually fearful that that support's going to be dropped for me now. There's an imperative need, where I live in Willaura I can list 14 names right now of people who need the service."

As well as advocating for the services that have had the most dramatic benefit for his life, Koby has a clear-eyed view of the other mainstream service pressures that are making life hard for people in his community.

"Transportation is a big issue. A lot of people are elderly and can't drive. They can barely bring their bins in. On my walks I bring the bins in for them...

"In Stawell and Ararat... people are living with fear of discrimination… And I've been truthful to them through my journey with alcohol and other drugs detox. And people have come to me asking me for help and asking me how I got into it. So accessibility to information is really important too."

As well as campaigning for his local community, Koby has taken it upon himself to try to address some of the gaps in community services and information, doing letterbox drops with pamphlets about local drug and alcohol supports.

"How do people know where to get these (services) from. People don't get the Stawell News because there's only two articles and the rest is ads. In Willaura our newsletter doesn't get dropped off to letterboxes anymore. How do people know who aren't on social media where to find these opportunities?

"This is all about rebuilding community and connection and not letting it fail again, because during COVID everyone was locked up and it kind of fell apart."

Koby is all about making community connections – between people, between services, between people who can offer help and those who need it.

He'd like to see a 'lend a hand' campaign, so that people could provide whatever help they can to their neighbours, without the onus on vulnerable people to make the first move and reach out.

"Even if we had T-shirts or something – or a tattoo across the forehead! – so people could feel comfortable to come and say 'can you help me with this?'"

Future direction 6
Support local community-based networks, interventions and policies

At many Listening Tour sessions, people spoke about problems in their local communities in a way that offered insights into unexpected linkages, and potential solutions.

Local people know what is needed in their local area.

This is one of the cornerstone principles of policies that adopt a 'place-based approach', which aims to enable communities to develop answers to their own local problems.

Place-based approaches acknowledge that people's problems are often specific to their geographic region or community. They take a collaborative view of problem-solving and partner with communities, local businesses and/or local government to address disadvantage and inequality.

These approaches are designed to empower local communities to have their voices heard, develop flexible and holistic responses to their own local needs, and build community capacity through the process.

The success of local programs and services we learned of during the Listening Tour was clearly related to their ability to utilise community knowledge and networks.

For instance, in the Latrobe Valley in Gippsland we learned of a partnership between local people and service providers, facilitated by Morwell Neighbourhood House.

Through this partnership, staff at the Neighbourhood House – locals with deep insights into the needs of their community – have been able to upscale effective programs.

For example, *The People's Kitchen* program – in partnership with Latrobe Health Assembly – brings community together to tackle food insecurity. Local volunteers prepare healthy home-cooked meals for the community, with local businesses chipping in to cover the cost of groceries and donating their employees' time to cook meals every Friday.

"Government needs to trust us and have belief in us. They have to open doors. They need to invest, resource, fund. Back our big ideas." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly, Morwell

"Empower local leaders, tap into existing expertise. We know how to read the river and work the pumps etc." Community member, Echuca Neighbourhood House

In the first year of *The People's Kitchen*, 224 volunteers made 3,457 meals and served 6,227 people.

Another program developed through partnership between Morwell Neighbourhood House and the Latrobe Health Assembly has been upscaled to run across the Latrobe Valley. The *Healthy You Roadshow* Series brings local services to the doorsteps of communities, offering a combination of foodbank and holistic health supports to people who wouldn't normally be able to access them.

As well as improving health outcomes in the region, the program provides an opportunity for communities to come together, connect and build a sense of pride in their local area.

This is an example of what can be achieved when government listens to and partners with local communities – including through community organisations and local businesses – to genuinely respond to place-based needs and empower communities to thrive.

Norla's story

"Every child had a story. They all had a story."

Norla is a long-time resident of Bairnsdale in East Gippsland.

She has seen decades of change in the town, including in the way that services are offered.

Norla used to be involved in running a program to support at-risk young people, but three years ago it was taken out of community control.

This is Norla's story in her own words.

The program was set up through the Local Learning and Employment Network many years ago. It was called Changing Lanes.

We decided that what was needed in the town was education for the young people that had dropped out of school. We did a survey through all the youth organisations and we came up with a list of 200 students who were not in education or training.

We got them together without mentioning the word 'school'… We got onto a local employment agency that provided us with a purpose-built building we designed.

It provided meals for the kids… There was a lot of couch-surfers, homeless kids…. In its first year we had about 75 kids go through the program.

It had a pool table… We had clothing, we had showers. The purpose-built building had a full kitchen. We had two freezers that the local Patties Pies and Dennison Foods filled every week.

We were supported by the local Rotary Clubs, the Lions, the churches – they used to bring boxes of food and fruit and we prepared meals for the kids because they'd come without food.

Every day when we started we'd do a Maslow's assessment of where they were at – did they need food, did they have accommodation, did they need clean clothes, where were they at… We'd get things for them on financial planning, things on how not to get pregnant, all those things.

My job was school to work transition, I used to make their resumes, find them jobs or work experience.

They also got programs that were designed to their level of ability.

We did things like music, we did a lot of art… We did a wonderful art program at the art gallery, we had a young man who was fined by the local council for doing graffiti everywhere, so we set up a program in spray painting. I got car panels and we painted them all and actually got funding to employ him to take the kids to do the program and they did an exhibition in the local gallery which was just sensational. Somebody picked him up as a talented artist from there and he ended up going to TAFE and doing art.

Every child had a story. They all had a story.

After two years we had a message from the local police that said that crime in the local CBD had dropped by 30 per cent and they accredited it to the fact that we had these kids off the street during the day.

But three years ago they closed the program. The [Department] of Education located in Sale…. They really didn't consult. They said to people that they'd just moved it but no, they closed it.

They still conduct a program but it's not at the same level because not many kids turn up.

It's not the same. It wasn't under the auspices of the school… Now all the school rules have come in they've taken the humanity out of dealing with these young people.

They don't come to meet their friends, they don't have a recreation space.

They relocated into a building where they get a room… but they don't have a base. On a cold morning they're outside… because they share the space with other people.

They stopped the transport [of kids to and from the program] because they said under school rules we couldn't have a volunteer driver, we had to have a qualified teacher with them. But if the qualified teacher was the only one there who was going to mind the kids that turned up while he was out picking them up? The hurdles became impossible.

The destruction of the program has been really quite agonising to watch because we see the kids now around the streets, we see what's happening.

These kids – some of them were off the rails, they just needed a breather, they just needed somebody to point them in the right direction, talk with them, treat them like new people every day.

They want to quantify everything now. We can't quantify what we did for young people and what we do for people with humanity and education.

It's like teaching kids to swim, you don't know which ones you've saved.

Future direction 7

Support the community sector organisations and workforce that support people through hard times

Across the Listening Tour we heard many personal stories that embody a combination of difficult social problems.

A young person we heard from at Sunshine Youth Projects, for example, is sleeping on friends' couches. He is unable to get a job that will give him financial security, unable to secure a home in a red-hot housing market, without the time and money to undertake further study. This person is struggling not just materially but socially and psychological. He is unable to eat well or care for his health, he is angry and anxious, socially disconnected and disempowered.

This is an individual story, but the issues behind it are structural and systemic. Looked at in the broad view, what someone in this position needs is access to services and opportunities: housing, healthcare, education.

Looked at on a local, human level, what they need is individual support.

They need someone who knows about and can help them access the services and opportunities that are available. And they need someone to talk to.

More often than not, the people on the front line of Victoria's complex social problems are local community leaders and community sector workers.

The important role that community leaders, organisations and networks play in people's lives was expressed to us over and over again during the Listening Tour.

"This house has resurrected me. I was scared coming here by myself and living in a new area and these women have been unreal to me." Community member, Leongatha Community House

"If it wasn't for here I would have been a very lonely person." Community member, Grampians Community Health

"Morwell Neighbourhood House gives the best support I've received: leadership, passion, intelligence, inclusion, collaboration, willingness to make it work is extraordinary." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

Community leaders, networks and organisations do a huge amount of work for local people and places.

But they are working at and sometimes beyond capacity. Local community leaders are suffering burnout. They need recognition and adequate working conditions.

Government needs to fund and invest in community networks and organisations.

With recognition, fair funding, and a 'place at the table' of government planning, these people and organisations have the will, the skills, and the place-based community insights and networks to be at the centre of a renewed commitment to providing Victorians the services and connections they need to thrive.

"Without the Neighbourhood House we'd have nothing… There is nothing but what the local community do and they're the ones who do everything."
Community member, Echuca Neighbourhood House

"For our community we have community leaders or workers in the community. Our community will call us (leaders, workers) to ask what to do, where to go. Leaders become the navigators of the community because they're connected to people and they know how to access services."
Community member, Settlement Services International

"The hardest thing about working in the sector is how incessant it is. We're never able to come up for air. We're constantly feeling like we're facing a tsunami. It can be exhausting." Sector worker

Methodology

The 2023 Voices of Victoria Listening Tour was the second project of its kind undertaken by VCOSS, following on from the 2022 Listening Tour.

As with the first Listening Tour, our overarching purpose with the 2023 Tour was to hear and platform the voices of lesser-heard Victorians, being particularly attuned to structuring the Tour in a way that reduced barriers to attendance and made people feel comfortable and confident to share their stories.

Overview

For the 2023 Listening Tour, VCOSS partnered with Neighbourhood Houses and other community organisations to host 15 sessions across Victoria – five in regional locations and 10 in metropolitan Melbourne.

Where we went

1. Dandenong – CALD women
2. Sunshine – young people
3. Bairnsdale – regional communities
4. Northcote – people with disability
5. Berwick – older men
6. Echuca – flood impacted communities
7. Leongatha – regional communities
8. Stawell – community health users
9. Morwell – regional communities

To make sure we were engaging with people who might have specific barriers to attending or might be hesitant to speak up in general sessions, we hosted a number of 'deep dive' sessions with specific cohorts.

The following sessions were held online or in a central location but were attended by participants from across the state:

10. Student SRC representatives (North Melbourne)
11. Migrant and refugee communities (Carlton)
11. LGBTIQ+ community (Carlton)
12. Public housing tenants (Richmond)
    Community sector workforce (online)
    Kinship carers (online)

In addition, individual in-person, online or phone interviews were offered to potential participants who weren't able to attend a session or didn't feel confident to share their story in a group setting.

In total, the Tour heard from 317 people. This was supplemented by 571 Victorians polled through Essential Media (see p.54).
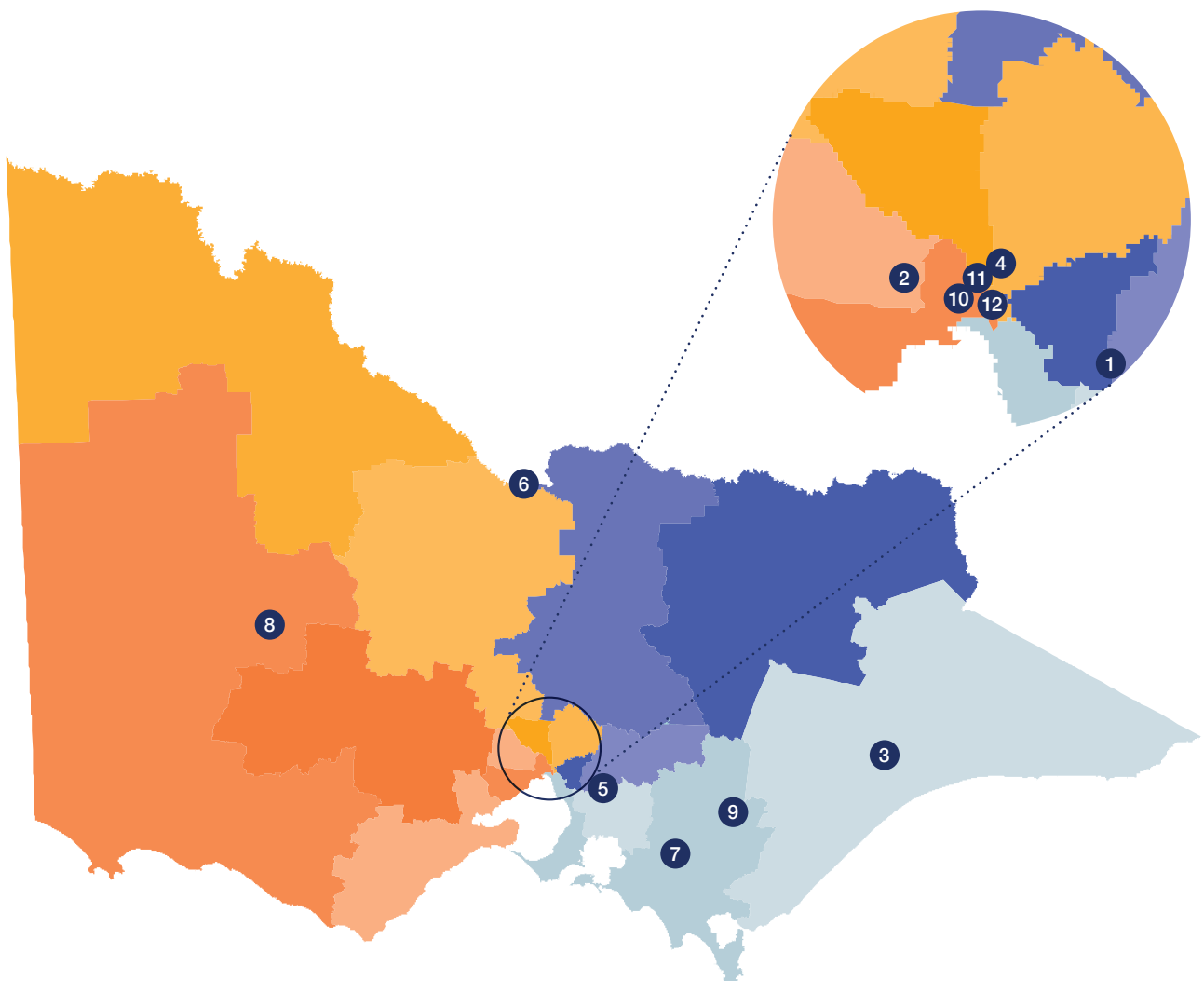
Who did we hear from

Anonymous demographic and personal information was collected at Listening Tour sessions, from which we established that a broad cross-section of Victorians were participating – across ages, backgrounds, ethnicities and occupations.

127 people from multicultural communities

14 carers

8 First Nations persons

63 people with disability

43 young people

125 people from regional communities

33 public housing tenants

66 community sector workers

317 people engaged with throughout listening sessions

571 Victorians polled through Essential Media

Age

- <18 years (12)
- 18–30 (34)
- 30–40 (30)
- 40–50 (34)
- 50–60 (33)
- 60–70 (64)
- 70–80 (30)
- 80+ (10)
- Prefer not to say (4)

Gender
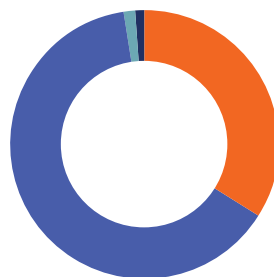
- Male (101)
- Female (188)
- Non-binary (4)
- Transgender (3)

First Nations participation

In VCOSS's first Listening Tour, conducted in early 2022, we consulted specifically with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups about challenges particular to First Nations Victorians. In the 2023 tour we engaged with First Nations people through general Listening Tour sessions but we didn't host any sessions specifically with First Nations communities. This is because the feedback we received when we reached out to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations was that their communities were heavily involved in Treaty and Voice consultations, spread thin and not wanting to duplicate their advocacy efforts, which are powerfully manifest in The Yoorrook Justice Commission Interim Report.[2]

Voices from the sector

As well as hearing in most Listening Tour sessions from people who work in the community sector, VCOSS hosted a dedicated session for community sector workers.

Workers share their thoughts about:
- Increasing volume and complexity of case loads
- Staff training and shortages
- Managing stress, burnout and fatigue
- Funding for community organisations
- Pandemic impacts and working remotely
- Staying connected into the future

A full report on our community sector Listening Tour session is available on the VCOSS website.[3]

Design of the Listening Tour

Hearing from lesser-heard voices in our communities means being able to find, interest and engage people who aren't usually involved in government processes, and being able to hear their stories in settings that present as few barriers as possible. Barriers could be any combination of physical, logistical, linguistic or cultural, or more nebulous but no less prohibitive personal barriers to do with feeling safe, confident and empowered to speak.

To avoid the pitfalls of closed-off, overly structured or hierarchically ordered research, sessions were framed around loose and open-ended questions and prompts, which could be modified by facilitators according to the makeup of sessions and the flow of conversation.

Generally, sessions started with an introductory question inviting participants to share how they were feeling right now.

The rest of the session was structured around the following questions:
- What challenges are you facing?
- What do you need to live a good life?
- Who do you turn to for support?
- What is one policy change you would most like to see?

To increase participation, engagement, diversity and equity, we gave deliberate consideration to many factors, including:
- Partnership – partnering with community organisations that have inbuilt, trusted networks in their local communities.
- Method – being deliberative about engagement method, which involved offering multiple options to engage: face-to-face, online or by telephone.
- Geographic location – ensuring that a good mix of metro and regional sessions were held in locations across the state.
- Space – ensuring that the spaces where sessions were held were accessible, comfortable and welcoming for all.
- Safety – ensuring that people with diverse life experiencing – including war, sexual assault and family violence – felt safe and supported to tell their stories.

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2   Yoorrook Justice Commission, *Yoorrook with Purpose: Interim Report*, June 2022, https://yoorrookjusticecommission.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Yoorrook-Justice-Commission-Interim-Report.pdf, accessed 1 August 2023

3   https://vcoss.org.au/listening-tour-2023-sector-workers

- Diversity and inclusion – ensuring that people from a range of backgrounds and circumstances would feel comfortable to participate, regardless of factors including socio-economics, cultural background, disability, age, gender and sexuality.
- Food – ensuring that culturally appropriate food was served, discussed and prepared in partnership with local community members.
- Privacy and confidentiality – ensuring people's privacy, confidentiality and their preferences for how and where they were represented were respected, including in photos and in writing.
- Compensation – working out a suitable form and amount of compensation that would reimburse participants for their time.
- Feedback and evaluation – building in both informal and formal methods of feedback, including an opportunity for participants to provide feedback after the session.

Beyond these factors, we also gave a lot of consideration to accountability. It's important to our project, and to all community engagement projects, that people know their time has been valued, their ideas and concerns have been heard, and their participation has contributed to tangible progress for the future.

To this end, at the conclusion of the Tour VCOSS is looping back to communities, presenting the findings from the sessions and providing each partnering community organisation with resources to inform them of the work they have contributed to: an in-person debrief, a visual poster of findings, a hard copy report, and a place-specific summary of findings from their community.

Place-specific summaries can be accessed here: https://vcoss.org.au/listening-tour-2023-sessions

Essential Media polling

To test the findings we heard in Listening Tour sessions against a wider cohort of respondents, VCOSS engaged Essential Media to undertake polling.

Essential Media's omnibus poll, carried out in July 2023, received 571 respondents.

Evaluation

In the second VCOSS Listening Tour we were able to assess and refine what elements worked well to foster effective community engagement.

Facilitation of sessions was streamlined to give people as broad a remit as possible to share their experiences, while still providing a safe and, where necessary, structured environment for conversation.

Community feedback indicated a high level of appreciation for the Listening Tour, with 90 per cent of participants indicating they were very or extremely satisfied with the sessions, and more than 92 per cent saying they felt very or extremely comfortable, safe and supported to share their stories.

Feedback included:

"Great initiative and great for the community to be heard." Community member, Grampians Community Health

"Honoured to be here today." Community member, Grampians Community Health

"Thank you for genuinely listening to the whole range of folks who came along." Jika Jika Community Centre

"I think it's a really good initiative, it's good for the community to feel we're being heard, that people who aren't a suburb of Melbourne are being heard as well." Community member, Grampians Community Health

"I feel quite hopeful that things can change and they will. I feel like it's really important what we're doing." Community member, Queerspace

"I feel quite committed and energised. It's been great to be part of a safe space." Community member, Queerspace

"Maybe anger could turn into hopefulness." Community member, Grampians Community Health

"Forums like this are really important so we can get our voices heard." Community member, Jika Jika Community Centre

"There's so much knowledge and skill in this room, we need to be able to share it, we're missing connections." Community member, Grampians Community Health
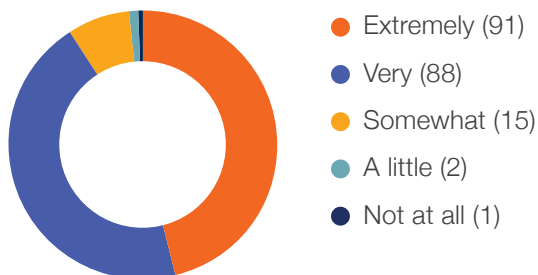
"I want to see this happen much more. We are on the right track. We need to plan the best pathways together." Community member, Latrobe Health Assembly

"Please keep this – Voices of Victoria – going. Doing so may make a difference." Community member, Bairnsdale Neighbourhood House

"I think there could be some really strong connections in the room here. The excitement around connections is really inspiring. Thank you for the opportunity to meet all these people." Community member, Grampians Community Health

"I think it's great asking young people to share their opinions and experiences. Would definitely do this again." Community member, Youth Projects Sunshine Hub

How satisfied overall were you with the session?

- Extremely (91)
- Very (88)
- Somewhat (15)
- A little (2)
- Not at all (1)

How comfortable, safe and supported did you feel to share your story?

- Extremely (121.5)
- Very (58.5)
- Somewhat (12)
- A little (3)
- Not at all (0)

Acknowledgements

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