

# VCOSS Community Sector Summit

## Reimagine What's Possible

Monday, 6 October 2025 | Melbourne Town Hall

## VCOSS Community Sector Summit

### Post-event summary

#### Introduction

Thank you to everyone who joined us at the VCOSS Community Sector Summit at Melbourne Town Hall. The day reflected the many conversations I've had with sector leaders over the past year, conversations that highlighted both the scale of the challenges we face and the strength of our shared commitment to Victorian communities.

Across those discussions, and again at the Summit, several themes consistently emerged: rising inequality and housing stress, pressures on rural and regional communities, the ongoing journey of Treaty and Aboriginal self-determination, escalating gendered harms, and the impacts of climate change, rapid technological change and global instability. Many of you also raised concerns about increasing demand, funding constraints and the strain on an undervalued workforce.

Just as strongly, you spoke about the need for spaces where we can think collectively, break down silos and build stronger connections across the sector.

This report-back summarises what we heard from you throughout the day across the four themed breakout sessions designed to encourage cross-sector collaboration. Your insights will be used to shape our shared advocacy and priorities in 2026 and beyond.

Thank you again for your valued leadership and partnership.

**Juanita Pope**  
CEO, VCOSS



## What we did

On Monday, 6 October, VCOSS invited leaders from across Victoria's community sector to explore shared challenges, build momentum for coordinated action and hear from influential state and federal figures shaping the future of our sector.

We also asked guests to join together to workshop how we'll influence system change towards a Victoria free of poverty and disadvantage, by tackling the some of the biggest challenges facing our society today as well as the big shifts that are needed to solve them.

### The four workshop themes

Equity across generations,  
geographies and genders

An innovative, well-resourced  
community sector

Essentials for everyone

Trust, safety and community  
cohesion

### The big shifts required for change

Tackle the drivers of  
income and wealth  
inequality

Grow community  
connectedness and  
social inclusion

Support Aboriginal  
self-determination

Fix the housing system

Plan for a climate-  
changed future

Rebuild trust in  
government, oversight  
bodies and services

Address underservicing  
and its impacts

Turn the tide for children  
and future generations

Enable collective impact

Shift focus from  
efficiency and cost to  
outcomes

Safeguard rights

Realise fair and equal  
access to resources,  
power and opportunities



# Purpose, power and hope in uncertain times

- Prof Jo Barraket AM
- Dr Alison Roberts
- Sarah Davies AM
- Dr Jill Gallagher AO
- Ahmed Hassan OAM
- Margherita Coppolino



## More about the four themes

Prior to the Summit, we identified four overarching, cross-cutting themes that are intended to help us build a shared vision and define our collective priorities for Victoria's future. The themes are deliberately intersectional, sector-spanning and unconstrained by our typical 'buckets' and bureaucratic categories. They are:

### **Equity across generations, geographies and genders**

Pervasive, market-based design thinking that gives primacy to protecting capital and shareholder returns has created a stark divide between the haves and the have nots. We need to consider deep and adaptive behavioural changes, as well as systemic fixes like tax reform, to shift the dial and create a more equitable society for all genders and across all areas for generations to come.

### **Trust, safety and community cohesion**

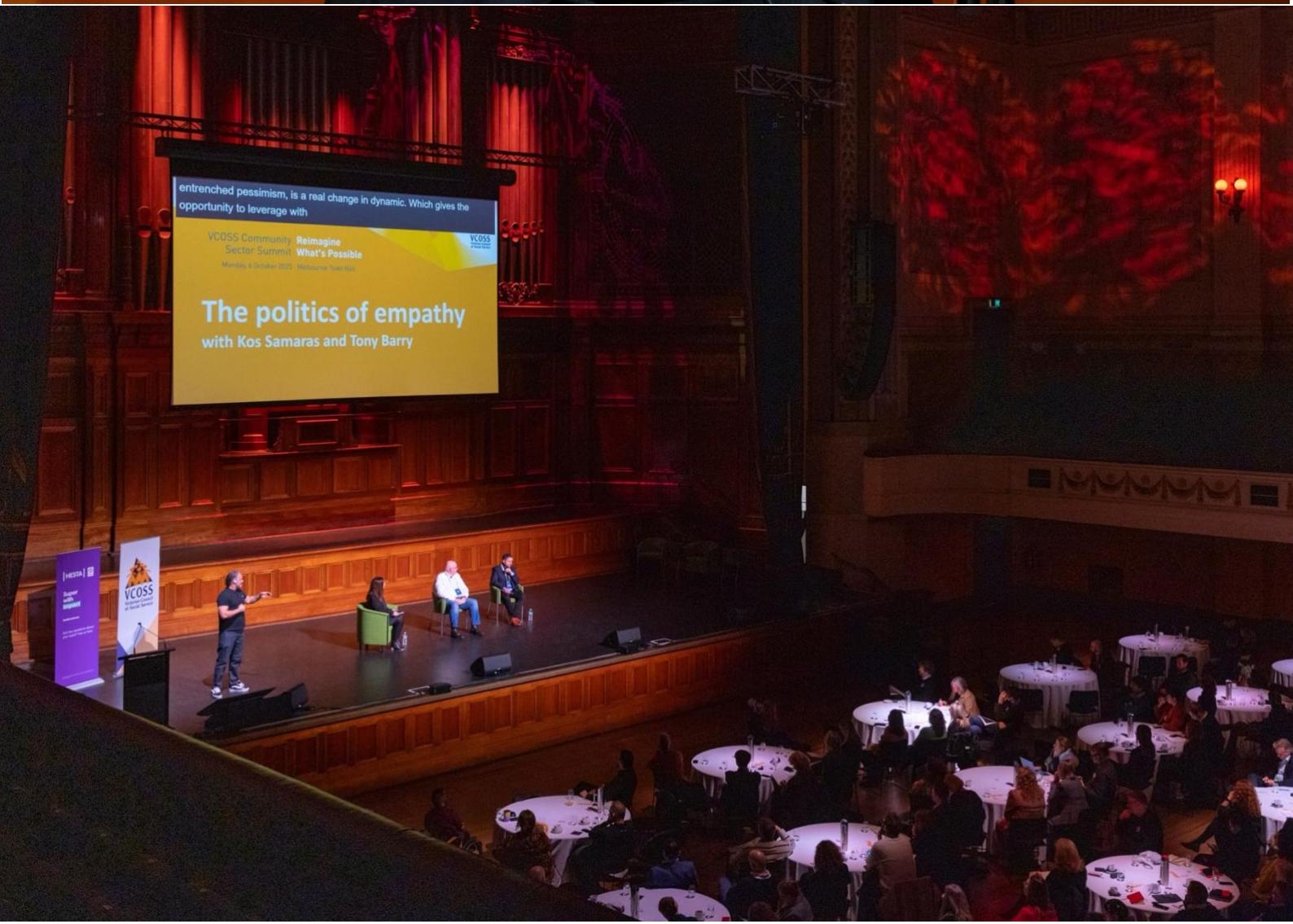
Trust in government and institutions has been eroded by systemic racism, over policing and punitive treatment of marginalised communities and individuals. How can we facilitate community-generated solutions to community-identified challenges, and what is the role and responsibility of people and organisations who work on the inside track to be receptive and responsive to those occupying the outside track? As bridging people and organisations, we can and should use our position as conduits and allies to create bubbles of safety for racialised communities and individuals, and advocate for justice.

### **Essentials for everyone**

Everyone should have fair and reliable access to essential services. The language media and politicians use to describe the 'cost of living crisis' makes it sound like a natural phenomenon. In actual fact, high and unfair prices are the result of choices made by governments and businesses. We have the power to solve this – not with "more competition" as we have been trying for decades – but by forcing companies to put people on the best deal, calling on the government to regulate prices, and putting an end to poverty premiums for essential services.

### **An innovative, well-resourced community sector**

It's not ideas or effort we lack; it is the existing structures – the policies, practices, and funding models – that are preventing real change. What we need to innovate most is our mindset. As VCOSS members, our vision is a Victoria without poverty - where the communities we serve don't face the challenges we currently support them with. A Victoria where organisations like ours are no longer needed. That's the destination. The work now is to act like that's possible.



## Theme 1

# Equity across generations, geographies and genders

### What we heard you say:

The economy serves us and doesn't have immutable laws that are beyond change or refute. It is ours to change, and we can, with the right technical and adaptive fixes.

It is the deep and difficult adaptive changes that will shift the dial. The change that is embedded in our human connection. The behavioural change that makes businesses, governments, shareholders and capital ask, what is enough? And when I have enough, how do I help others have enough?

Unlike what our economy assumes, being a good ancestor isn't about stockpiling wealth now at the expense of the future and concentrating power to hand it to our children. Being a good ancestor is about laying the foundations for a future for all.

### The big shifts we think are relevant for positive change:

- Tackle the drivers of income and wealth inequality
- Grow community connectedness and social inclusion
- Support Aboriginal self-determination
- Fix the housing system
- Plan for a climate-changed future

### The big shift you named as the highest priority:

- Tackle the drivers of income and wealth inequality

### Some of the ideas you told us to explore:

- Reframe investment in the community as investment in the economy
- Stay the course on Treaty and Aboriginal Self Determination
- Support place-based approaches for community benefit
- Long term plans and funding cycles to reflect the goal of intergenerational change
- Address gender inequity and its intersections with health, housing, employment etc.

## Theme 2

# Trust, safety and community cohesion

### What we heard you say:

We have ceded too much space to policing as the primary response to social issues – often at the expense of community-led solutions.

What would it look like if we centred community-generated solutions to community-identified challenges?

How can we establish trust when communities have faced continuous betrayals by successive governments?

### The big shifts we think are relevant for positive change:

- Grow community connectedness and social inclusion
- Address under-servicing and its impacts
- Turn the tide for children and future generations
- Rebuild trust in government, oversight bodies, services
- Safeguard rights

### The big shift you named as the highest priority:

- Grow community connectedness and social inclusion

### Some of the ideas you told us to explore:

- Deprivatise work that should be led by community
- Establish a Commission for Future Generations
- Embed lived and living experience in leadership across Government and the sector
- More investment in early intervention, including increasing funding for schools and youth workers
- Create systems worthy of community trust by increasing police and Government accountability and transparency



## Theme 3

### Essentials for everyone

#### What we heard you say:

The “cost-of-living crisis” is spoken of as a nebulous, inevitable thing, but we know that it is not. High prices have causes – they are the result of choices made by governments and businesses.

Price rises should be set in a way that considers the financial position of customers, or renters. We need limits on how high prices can rise in any given year.

Stop poverty premiums for essential services. It’s time for the not-for-profit sector to call out these “poor pay more” pricing strategies and work with governments to ban the most unfair tactics.

#### The big shifts we think are relevant for positive change:

- Fix the housing system
- Rebuild trust
- Safeguard rights
- Address under-servicing and its impacts
- Tackle the drivers of income and wealth inequality

#### The big shift you named as the highest priority:

- Fix the housing system

#### Some of the ideas you told us to explore:

- Shift investment attitudes so that rental providers understand they are delivering an essential service
- Apply targeted universalism to essential services for greater equity
- Establish an oversight process to ensure government meets a set quota for social housing
- Ensure regulation is working to make access to essential services (including housing) fairer and more affordable
- Legislate that all boards are required to have a consumer representative

## Theme 4

# An innovative, well-resourced community sector

### What we heard you say:

What's holding us back from innovating aren't the lack of ideas or effort. It's the structures – the policies, practices, funding models – that are stifling change.

We need to stop hoping that more government funding will solve our issues and get us all the way to that vision. Of course we need more funding, but it's not going to happen on the scale we need it.

In our sector, vision comes first; everything else must ladder up to a world where we're no longer needed. If it doesn't, it's time to rethink.

### The big shifts we think are relevant for positive change:

- Realise fair and equal access to resources, power, opportunities
- Enable collective impact
- Shift focus from efficiency and cost to outcomes
- Maintain and rebuild trust
- Support Aboriginal self-determination

### The big shift you selected as the highest priority:

- Realise fair and equal access to resources, power, opportunities

### Some of the ideas you told us to explore:

- Embed shared data systems between government and the sector and across services so that people don't fall through the cracks
- Flip the 'risk' mindset across sector funding so multiple ministers share responsibility for funded programs
- Fix long term undervaluation of the highly gendered community sector workforce
- Extend funding cycles and contract terms for greater efficiencies and to have lasting impacts
- Relational contracting and collaborative commissioning to foster collaboration for shared outcomes



## What comes next

As Victoria prepares to enter an election year, we will be using the feedback, insights and ideas you contributed at the VCOSS Community Sector Summit to develop a shared approach to advocacy in 2026 that ensures the goal of ending poverty and disadvantage remains firmly on the public agenda.

The social and community services sector is part of the largest employing and fastest growing industry in Victoria, with over 185,000 paid workers and more than 427,000 volunteers. Over the next decade, it is expected to deliver almost twice as many new jobs in Victoria as the construction sector and five times more than manufacturing.

When the members of our sector stand together, we become one of the most powerful forces in the state and an influential voice for change.

In 2026, let's use that collective power – and shift the system towards a state where all Victorians live in inclusive, caring and resilient communities underpinned by a fair and sustainable economy.



## Who was involved

More than 350 people from the following organisations helped us plan the Summit and brought it to life on the day. Thank you to everyone who participated.

54 Reasons	Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare	Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria
Alannah & Madeline Foundation	Centre for Impact and Change	EV Strengthening Communities
Amaze	Centre for Policy Development	EY
Anchor Community Care	Changesmith Consulting	Family Life
Anglicare Victoria	Clarity and Impact Coaching and Consulting	Federation of Community Legal Centres
Anika Legal	cohealth	Financial Counselling Victoria
ARC Justice	Community Housing Industry Association Victoria	Fitzroy Legal Service
Australian Charities and Not-For-Profits Commission Advisory Board	Community Information & Support Victoria	Foster Care Association of Victoria
Australian Communities Foundation	Concern Australia Welfare	FVREE
Australian Democracy Network	Consumer Policy Research Centre	Gender Equity Victoria
Australian Productivity Commission	Council on the Ageing Victoria	Genetic Support Network of Victoria
Australian Progress	Council to Homeless Persons	GenWest
Australian Services Union	CREATE Foundation	Gippsland Lakes Community Health
Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council	dandolopartners	Gippsland Youth Spaces
Barwon Community Legal Service	Darebin Council Partnerships team	Give Where You Live Foundation
Berry Street	Deaf Victoria	Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
Better Health Network	Drummond Street Services	Grampians Disability Advocacy
Borderlands Cooperative	Each	Helen Macpherson Smith Trust
Brimbank City Council	Early Childhood Australia	<b>HESTA (supporting partner)</b>
Brotherhood of St. Laurence	Early Childhood Intervention Association Vic / Tas	Holstep Health
Cafs (Child and Family Services Ballarat)	Eastern Community Legal Centre	Housing for the Aged Action Group
Carers Victoria	Economic Media Centre	HumanAbility
Catholic Social Services Victoria	Energy Consumers Australia	
Centre Against Racial Profiling	Equity Trustees	

Hume Riverina Community Legal Service	Neighbourhood Economics
Inner Eastern Local Learning Employment Network	Neighbourhood Houses Victoria
Inner Melbourne Community Legal	Ngaweeyan Maar-oo
International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association	No to Violence
IPC Health	Odyssey House Victoria
Jesuit Social Services	Peninsula Community Legal Centre
Juno	Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre
Justice Connect	Place Australia
Knox Infolink	Playgroup Victoria
Latitude Network	Polaron Connect
Launch Housing	Policy Fox
Leadership Victoria	Primary Care Connect
Leading Progress	Queen Elizabeth Centre
Live4Life	RedBridge Group
Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation	RMIT University
MacKillop Family Services	Sacred Heart Mission
McAuley	Safe and Equal
Measure to Evolve	SSI
Melbourne City Mission	Sexual Assault Services Victoria
Melbourne Social Equity Institute	Social Ventures Australia
Meli	South East Community Links
Mental Health Victoria	South-East Monash Legal Service
MinterEllison	Southside Justice
Mission Australia	St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria
Mortgage Stress Victoria	STAR Victoria
Multicultural Centre for Women's Health	State Schools' Relief
Multicultural Consulting Services	State Trustees
Murdoch Children's Research Institute	Tandem Carers
National Disability Services	Tenants Victoria
	The Brian M Davis Charitable Foundation
	The Bridge Youth & Family Service
	<b>The Fair Co.</b>
	<b>The Jack Brockhoff Foundation</b>
	<b>The Myer Foundation and Sidney Myer Fund</b>
	<b>The Salvation Army</b>
	<b>Thorne Harbour Health</b>
	<b>Uniting Vic.Tas</b>
	<b>Vacro</b>
	<b>VANISH</b>
	<b>Victoria Law Foundation</b>
	<b>VACCHO</b>
	<b>Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association</b>
	<b>Victorian Healthcare Association</b>
	<b>VicSRC</b>
	<b>VincentCare Victoria</b>
	<b>VMIAC</b>
	<b>Westjustice</b>
	<b>Windana</b>
	<b>WIRE</b>
	<b>Women and Mentoring</b>
	<b>Women with Disabilities Victoria</b>
	<b>Women's Health Grampians</b>
	<b>Women's Health In the North</b>
	<b>Women's Legal Service Victoria</b>
	<b>Wordcraft</b>
	<b>Worklaw Solutions</b>
	<b>Your Community Health</b>
	<b>Youth Activating Youth</b>
	<b>Youth Affairs Council Victoria</b>
	<b>Youth Projects</b>
	<b>Thank you!</b>