VCOSS
Victorian Council of Social Service









Annual Report

2025–2026

About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body for Victoria's social and community sector and the state's premier social advocacy body.

VCOSS exists to end poverty and disadvantage in Victoria. We do this by supporting organisations and activities, through research and advocacy, and by connecting, convening, and working with others.

VCOSS' strength comes from our members and the people at the heart of their work. Our members include frontline service organisations, peak bodies and advocacy groups, working across a wide range of areas including health and wellbeing, children and family services, family violence, early childhood, housing, food systems, economic and civic participation, justice, disability and disaster response.

VCOSS' work is enriched by people with lived and living experience who share with us their personal stories, experiences and insights. Thank you for your courage and generosity.

We also gratefully acknowledge our funders and sponsors, including the Victorian Government.

VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country, and pays respect to Elders and Ancestors. Our office is located on the sovereign, unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation.



President and CEO message

In a year of rising living costs and an approaching state election, the work of a strong, connected community sector has never mattered more.

This was the first full year of VCOSS' Strategy 2025–28. Shaped by our members, the VCOSS Strategy has guided our policy priorities, our election advocacy, and the way we work with members and partners.

For many Victorians, the year brought continued pressure on household budgets and housing. These pressures fall hardest on people already experiencing poverty and disadvantage. They also fall on the organisations that support people.

Some of the year's most significant progress came in essential services, with energy retailers now required to move customers in hardship onto their cheapest available offer through the updated Energy Retail Code of Practice.

Our advocacy also contributed to further protections for renters – particularly in relation to compliance with minimum standards and discrimination against renters experiencing family violence. And the Parliamentary Inquiry into Climate Resilience adopted our call for building codes based on future climate projections, a recommendation the Government supported in full.

Nationally, we worked with Councils of Social Service across the country to secure a fairer outcome for community sector workers in the Fair Work Commission's gender undervaluation review of the SCHADS Award.

And when devastating bushfires struck in January 2026, we helped keep the sector connected through response and recovery.

Collaboration remains the foundation of our work. The VCOSS Community Sector Summit brought together more than 350 sector leaders to shape a shared vision for the sector's future – a vision that now informs our election advocacy.

Collectively, Victoria's social and community sector generates approximately $18 billion a year, employs over 200,000 people and engages more than 427,000 volunteers. When we act together, we are a significant force for change.

We thank our members, whose expertise and insight drive everything we do, and the people with lived and living experience who share their stories with us. We thank the VCOSS staff for their skill and commitment, and the Board for its steady stewardship. We were pleased to welcome Trish Quibell to the Board at the 2025 AGM, bringing valuable community health perspectives and strengthening the voice of regional Victoria in VCOSS decision-making, and Andrew McDonald to the Board in April 2026, bringing more than thirty years' experience across the not-for-profit, health and government sector. Jenny Leishman also joined as a Board Observer through The Observership Program, supporting the development of the next generation of diverse, skilled board leaders. We also gratefully acknowledge our funders.

With a state election in November, the year ahead offers a chance to put the issues most vital to our communities and the sector that serves them at the centre of public debate. We look forward to working with you, and with whoever forms the next government, toward a Victoria free from poverty and disadvantage.



Sue White
President, VCOSS



Juanita Pope
CEO, VCOSS

2025–2026 outcomes



Shift the system

We bring the sector's evidence and community expertise to decision-makers, to change the structures that entrench poverty and disadvantage.

In numbers

12
Policy changes materially influenced by VCOSS advocacy

146
Meetings with government decision-makers and influencers

52
Submissions and reports published

94
Ministerial advisory committee, taskforce, reference and advisory group meetings

Some of the system-shifting work we're most proud of from 2025–26 includes:

Fairer energy deals for people in hardship. Following years of advocacy by VCOSS and the sector, the Essential Services Commission now requires energy retailers to automatically move customers experiencing hardship onto their cheapest available offer.

Stronger protections for renters. VCOSS advocacy on rental fairness contributed to reforms to Victoria's residential tenancies laws, supported the establishment of the Rental Dispute Resolution Service, and helped shape the design of the Portable Bonds Scheme. VCOSS continued to lead housing advocacy through the Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance, and produced renting policy papers based on frontline worker insights and exploring family violence and renters with disabilities.

Climate resilience for people on low incomes. The Parliamentary Inquiry into Climate Resilience cited our submission 17 times in its final report, and adopted our call for building codes to be based on future climate projections – which the Victorian Government supported in full in its 2026 response. VCOSS also launched the *Adaptation for All* report and advocated for a flood-resilient homes program for Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

Prevention in youth justice. With the Smart Justice for Young People coalition, VCOSS helped lead the sector's response to the Victorian Government's proposed changes to youth justice laws. VCOSS is now contributing to the development of the Violence Reduction Unit, advocating for an approach that values existing sector expertise and centres whole-of-government policy on prevention and early intervention.

Making a case for the policy nexus between energy hardship and health. VCOSS completed the three-year Energy Health Nexus project, generating practical policy solutions to address the links between energy hardship, poor health and climate change. The project produced new evidence and recommendations to help governments and service providers better support people experiencing energy stress, while strengthening collaboration between the energy, health and community sectors.

2025–2026 outcomes



Communities in control

We connect organisations, communities and lived experience voices, so the decisions that affect people start with the people affected.

In numbers

140+
Coalitions convened and attended

350+
Sector leaders participated in 2025 Summit

28
VCOSS community and sector events

Ways that VCOSS has enabled and empowered the sector and our communities in 2025–26 include:

Bringing the sector together, and into the room with decision-makers. The VCOSS Community Sector Summit brought political leaders together with sector representatives to develop a shared vision for the future of Victoria. And VCOSS' annual post-Budget Treasurer's event gave the sector valuable insight and input into the Government's social policy agenda.

Supporting the sector through the 2026 bushfires. After the January 2026 bushfires, VCOSS convened statewide response meetings, ran webinars for more than 100 participants and kept the sector connected through recovery. VCOSS also advised government through the State Emergency Relief Team.

Achieving a fair award for community sector workers. During the Fair Work Commission's gender undervaluation review of the SCHADS Award, VCOSS represented community sector interests through submissions and conferencing, working alongside Councils of Social Service in other states and territories. More than 400 people attended VCOSS-led national briefings, and the final classification structure reflects improvements VCOSS sought.

Building the community services workforce. VCOSS worked with DFFH and other peak bodies to promote the Community and Social Services Graduate Program to employers, co-hosting information sessions and contacting recruiters directly, including in regional and rural areas.

Shaping future skills. In partnership with the Victorian Skills Authority, VCOSS convened the Industry Advisory Group for early educators, health and human services, sport and recreation, bringing together industry, unions and government to shape Victoria's future skills and training priorities. Discussions tackled critical workforce challenges including attraction and retention, workforce mobility, and AI and digital skills. A visit to Kangan Institute's Health and Community Centre of Excellence showcased innovative approaches to training the next generation of workers. VCOSS also contributed to cross-industry workshops on disability inclusion, gender equity and First Nations participation, helping advance a more inclusive and responsive skills and training system.

2025–2026 outcomes



Communities in control

Strengthening our collective voice. VCOSS strengthened its advocacy and impact through active participation in government advisory forums, sector alliances and civil society networks, ensuring community voices informed policy development and reform.

We continued to strengthen collaboration between government and the community sector through our role co-chairing the Human Services and Health Partnership Implementation Committee (HSHPIC), bringing together senior executives from the Departments of Families, Fairness and Housing and Health, alongside community sector peak bodies. A refreshed meeting approach combined strategic 'deep dives' into funding and commissioning, disability foundational supports and workforce development with timely discussions on emerging sector priorities.

VCOSS contributed to key government advisory and reference bodies including the Housing Peaks Forum, Chief Commissioner of Police's Human Rights Strategic Advisory Group, Family Violence Reform Advisory Group, Equal Workplaces Advisory Council, Best Start Best Life Taskforce, Social Services Regulator Consultative Committee, Violence Reduction Unit Prevention Partnership Collective, Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Forum, Victorian Energy Upgrades Reform Taskforce and Essential Services Commission's Consumer Advisory Forum. Our CEO Juanita Pope continued to serve on the Portable Long Service Leave Authority Board as the industry expert for community services.

VCOSS also played leadership roles in sector strengthening and collective advocacy, including as convenor of the Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance, co-convening the One Million Homes Alliance, serving as a backbone member of Smart Justice for Young People, and contributing to Smart Justice for Women. Through our own networks – the Peaks and Statewide Networks Forum, Operations and Compliance Network, Climate Network, Disaster Resilience Network and Utilities Network – we connected organisations, shared expertise and strengthened collective capacity to respond to emerging challenges. Together, these collaborations amplified the sector's voice, built stronger partnerships and helped drive coordinated action towards a fairer Victoria.

> 'I get a lot of value out of attending the network meetings, so thank you for providing a great forum to learn what is happening in the sector in our region.'
> VCOSS network participant

2025–2026 outcomes



An impactful VCOSS

We invest in the relationships, capability and foundations that let our members, our staff and the sector thrive.

In numbers

1,300+

Organisations represented by VCOSS membership

8,277

Email subscribers

120+

Media stories

Behind our advocacy and convening work sits a strong organisation. In 2025–26 we continued to invest in the foundations that make our impact possible, including:

A new strategy for 2025–28. VCOSS launched its 2025–28 Strategy, which in its first year has guided our policy priorities, election advocacy, member engagement and partnerships.

A new home. In November 2025, after almost 18 years at its offices in Exhibition Street, VCOSS moved to its new Lonsdale Street premises. The move has created a more contemporary environment for collaboration, engagement and sector leadership. The office provides an accessible and modern space for members, partners and stakeholders to connect, helping to strengthen relationships and support collective action on the issues affecting Victorian communities.

Investing in our people. VCOSS strengthened its investment in people and culture, creating new opportunities for staff development, collaboration and shared learning. The introduction of structured Professional Development Planning supported staff to identify growth opportunities, build their capabilities and align individual aspirations with organisational priorities. Quarterly all-staff collaboration days brought colleagues together to strengthen relationships, share knowledge and collectively plan for the future. The successful completion of a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement marked an important milestone for VCOSS during the year. The agreement delivered improved wage outcomes and progressive employment benefits including paid gender affirmation leave and expanded parental leave provisions. These changes reinforce VCOSS' commitment to equity, inclusion and staff wellbeing, while supporting the attraction and retention of a diverse and skilled workforce.

Strengthening VCOSS governance. VCOSS strengthened its governance foundations in 2025–26. A new risk management policy suite, including a Risk Appetite Statement, established a more systematic approach to identifying and managing organisational risks. A review of the Investment Policy strengthened our commitment to prudent financial management alongside environmental, social and governance (ESG) principles.

Events

Post-Budget Treasurer's Lunch

VCOSS brought community sector leaders face-to-face with the Hon Jaclyn Symes MP at its flagship Treasurer's Lunch. Hosted by the ABC's Richard Willingham, the event featured a keynote and Q&A with the Treasurer, and a panel with Farah Farouque (Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria) and Peter Breadon (Grattan Institute). With Victoria heading towards an election, the event provided a powerful platform to scrutinise Budget decisions, elevate sector priorities and sharpen advocacy agendas for the year ahead.



Standing up for VicHealth

VCOSS joined around 200 health advocates at Victorian Parliament to rally against the proposed abolition of VicHealth. CEO Juanita Pope spoke on the value of independent health promotion in building healthier, fairer communities, urging the Government to protect VicHealth's future.



Celebrating diversity and inclusion

VCOSS staff marked IDAHOBIT with a colourful afternoon tea, reinforcing our commitment to a diverse, inclusive and welcoming workplace. Staff also celebrated NAIDOC Week, Pride March and other significant occasions through the year, living our values of solidarity and inclusion.







Community Sector Summit

The 2025 VCOSS Community Sector Summit brought together more than 350 community sector leaders – the first gathering of its kind since before COVID – creating a significant forum for collaboration, reflection and future advocacy planning. The Summit generated valuable input on sector-wide priorities, including feedback on themes and “10 big shifts” now informing VCOSS’ 2026 election platform and advocacy agenda. A summary of the Summit workshops was published on the VCOSS website. The event strengthened relationships between VCOSS members and with philanthropic and business leaders, and identified new opportunities for future sector leadership development and advocacy practice.



Education Forum

The 2025 VCOSS Education Forum attracted more than 150 participants, a sell-out event, demonstrating strong sector interest in addressing educational engagement, disengagement and re-engagement. In the context of the Victorian Government’s announcement of the ‘Adult Time for Violent Crime’ reforms, it provided a timely opportunity for discussion and reflection on the impacts of policy settings on children and young people. Featuring 20 speakers from academia, government, schools and the community sector, the event highlighted practical approaches to support student participation and inclusion, and provided a platform to strengthen dialogue between policymakers, practitioners and community organisations.



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