**‘What’s Important to Youth?’ – Discussion Paper**

**New Victorian Youth Policy**

**Whitehorse City Council Youth Services submission**

**6th November, 2015**

**What do you think of the draft vision?**

Whitehorse Youth Services believe that the broad vision is appropriate for the new youth policy.

**What do you think of the draft objectives?**

The comments below relate to specific draft objectives:

* *‘are heard and engaged by government in matters that affect them’*

Whitehorse Youth Services are pleased to see this objective included and feel it is important to ensure that young people are given the opportunity to have active engagement and consultation in matters which affect them. This is reflected in the Whitehorse Municipal Youth Plan 2014 - 2018 (action 5.3 - ‘ proactively engage young people in issues relevant to their lives, and encourage and enable young people to have a voice and participate in public discussion’).

* *‘have the opportunity to participate in education, training and employment to secure their economic future’*

The opportunity to participate in a day program is an important starting point. However, this objective could be strengthened by stating ‘have the opportunity *and necessary support* to participate…’ to recognise a significant number of young people will require to be actively supported to take advantage of opportunities.

* *‘are given a fair go, no matter their cultural background, gender identity, sexual orientation, intersex status, disability, health, religion, mental health status, or whether they live in a rural or regional location’.*

Whitehorse Youth Services does not believe the use of the phrase ‘are given a fair go’ is deemed appropriate. The term is vague and requires greater clarity in respect to its meaning and how it may be measured. Whitehorse Youth Services also suggest adding ‘economically disadvantaged backgrounds’ in order to be inclusive of young people living in challenging economic circumstances.

**What do you think should be done to improve educational opportunities for young people?**

A number of actions could be implemented to improve the educational opportunities for young people to ensure they are engaged in education. Key recommendations from Whitehorse Youth Services include the following:

1. *Increase alternative education and flexible learning options for young people.*

There is a substantial number for young people for whom ‘mainstream’ education is not meeting their needs and may benefit from attending an alternative educational setting. However, there are limited options available to young people to access opportunities outside mainstream education. An increase in the range of alternative educational options available and the removal of barriers to accessing these would result in better learning outcomes for these young people and reduce the number of students leaving school early.

1. *Support and services for young people disengaged or ‘at risk’ of disengaging from education.*

Whitehorse Youth Services recommends a targeted and specialised service to work with young people who are disengaged or ‘at risk’ of disengaging from education. Currently, schools and services do their best to maintain students engaged in education however, without adequate resources or specialised training/knowledge it can often be difficult to meet the complex needs of students. Whitehorse Youth Services believe greater support should be available to support students in schools. Many schools do not have access to specialised staff to work with the range of complex wellbeing issues students present with. Of particular importance is a service which links schools with community agencies that can provide specialised support. A flexible, targeted service, particularly one that could provide outreach support and services could reduce the number of young people disengaging form school.

A key issue highlighted in the Whitehorse Municipal Youth Plan 2014 – 2018 is to ‘sustain school attendance for as long as possible in a young person’s life’ (action 3.1). Diverse educational environments catering for diverse learning needs (point 1) and support services to assist disengaged young people (point 2) would enable greater number of young people to remain connected with education. Evidence demonstrates a strong link between school attendance and social inclusion and improved health and wellbeing.

1. *Support for families to assist young people remain in education.*

Parents and carers have a strong influence on the willingness of their young people to remain engaged in education. Parents and carers can at times feel they do not have the skills and knowledge to provide the necessary support to their child when issues arise in regard to their education. Greater support and information is required by parents and caregivers to adequately assist young people remain linked to education. The family unit needs to be in a better position to support and respond to a young person’s education needs.

**What do you think should be done to improve training opportunities for young people?**

1. *Improve access and support to training and apprenticeship opportunities.*

A key issue identified in the Whitehorse Municipal Youth Plan 2014 – 2018 is to provide greater support and opportunities for young people to access training and apprenticeships. This could be achieved by providing a greater number of training providers and places for young people at a cost that is not prohibitive. Training should be made more affordable for young people by either providing government funding for places or greater financial assistance directly to students to access training opportunities.

1. *Access to career counselling and guidance*

Young people undertaking courses/training should have access to specialised careers advice to ensure the pathway they have chosen is suitable, relevant, realistic and appropriate for both them and their intended career path. The issue of access to career counselling and guidance are identified as a key issue for young people in the Whitehorse Municipal Youth Plan (Action 3.10).

**What do you think should be done to increase employment opportunities for young people?**

1. *Greater work experience opportunities*

There needs to be a greater incentive for workplaces to provide work experience placements to young people. The opportunities need to be available to all young people and not necessarily those already engaged in the education system. Work experience provides young people with valuable experience, knowledge and skills to seek employment into the future. The Whitehorse Municipal Youth Plan 2014 - 2018 highlights the need to ‘provide services and support to young people to prepare for and secure employment’ (action 3.9). The ability for all young people to undertake work experience meets this goal.

1. *Incentives to employ disadvantaged young people.*

Marginalised young people often have difficulty identifying and maintaining employment. Support and incentives should be provided to encourage and enable employers to ‘take on’ young people whom are experiencing challenging circumstances. A possible initiative may be the implementation of a workplace mentoring system aimed at supporting disadvantaged young people maintain employment.

**What do you think should be done to improve the mental health of young people?**

1. *Access to universal prevention and early intervention programs.*

Whitehorse Youth Services believes universal mental health prevention programs should be available to all young people. The most logical place to implement early intervention programs is in the school environment. The issue of mental health and wellbeing should be implemented at an early age (primary school) and may include exploration of self care strategies and specific techniques such as ‘mindfulness’. Access to early intervention services for young people experiencing mental health issues was identified as an issue in the Whitehorse Municipal Youth Plan 2014 - 2018 (action 1.11 : ‘advocate for increased state funding to enable access to early intervention services’).

1. *Accessibility and cohesion of mental health services for young people.*

Whitehorse Youth Services believes further work is required to make the mental health sector more accessible and seamless for young people and their families. While there are a number of youth specific mental health services, the eligibility for these differ greatly and often young people and their families are confused about which service they should be approaching. More concerning is that young people can be referred from one service to the next without actually receiving any mental health support. Given young people can be reluctant to seek professional support to address mental health issues, it is imperative they have a positive experience when they do so. As such, there needs to be a ‘no wrong door’ type approach to mental health services for young people in Victoria.

1. *Reduce the prevalence and impact of bullying*

A key issue highlighted in the development of the Whitehorse Municipal Youth Plan 2014 – 2018 was the prevalence of bullying and its impact on the mental wellbeing of young people. The following actions are suggestions to be undertaken to assist in this area:

* Development of high profile campaign involving key stakeholders targeted towards reducing / eliminating bullying (Youth Plan action 3.6). Within this campaign the promotion of safe, respectful and appropriate behaviours among young people (action 3.5)
* Programs and initiatives to be implemented to support young people to combat and manage bullying (action 3.7)

**What do you think should be done to tackle alcohol and drug issues for young people?**

1. *Youth specific drug and alcohol services.*

Whilst there are a number of youth specific drug and alcohol services, there is still a need for greater access to detoxification and rehabilitation centres suitable for young people. Additionally, Whitehorse Youth Services recommends an increase in the capacity of these services to undertake outreach activities to engage with young people who would otherwise not access these services.

1. *Support for families to provide support*

Parents/carers and families may feel they have limited knowledge or skills to provide appropriate support to a young person experiencing drug or alcohol issues. Greater accessibility to information and services specifically for families will ensure they are best equipped to support young people address drug and alcohol issues.

1. *Review ramifications of illicit substance use*

Currently, when young people use / experiment with illicit substances it is often treated as a criminal matter rather than a health issue. This can result in young people becoming involved in the juvenile justice system due to drug use rather than them receiving treatment for their drug use / dependency. A review of the current strategy in working and responding to illicit drug users requires a state-wide review to ensure young people are adequately supported in leading ‘drug free’ lifestyles.

**What do you think should be done to improve housing for young people?**

1. *Access to emergency accommodation*

Whitehorse Youth Services believes young people need greater support and access to emergency accommodation. Young people have already experienced traumatic experience/s when faced with the need to access emergency accommodation. The ability to access accommodation during crisis situations needs to be seamless and not add to the issues already experienced by young person. Access to emergency accommodation prevents instances of young people ‘couch surfing’ and placing of undue pressure on peers / friends and their families. Support for young people to access emergency accommodation will prevent issues of youth homelessness which may in turn impact on other aspects of a young person’s life (ability to access a day program, maintain appropriate relationships, etc.).

1. *Affordable private rental*

Young people need the ability to access affordable private rental options to remain in their desired locality and remain connected to their community. Private rental is becoming out of reach for young people due to exorbitant rental prices and as a result of their limited income. Various strategies need to be implemented to ensure private rental is obtainable for young people in areas they actually wish to reside.

In the Whitehorse Municipal Youth Plan 2014 - 2018 affordable housing for young people, in particular emergency accommodation and affordable student accommodation are identified as an important issues for young people (action 4.34 - ‘increased government funding for improved affordable housing for young people’).

**What do you think should be done to tackle discrimination of young people?**

The issue of discrimination as a result of race, gender or sexual orientation appears to have a greater profile in society than discrimination based on one’s age. However, Whitehorse Youth Services believes community awareness needs to be raised in regards to discrimination based on age and the negative impact it may potentially have on young people. Negative media stereotypes of young people generate a sense of disempowerment and hopelessness for young people. The creation of more opportunities to celebrate young people and their achievements should be explored to counter the negative views of young people and increase their self-worth. Strategies need to be implemented to ‘celebrate young people and promote positive stories about young people and the positive contribution that they make to our community’ (action 5.1 of the Whitehorse Municipal Youth Plan 2014 – 2018).

**What do you think should be done to improve public transport for young people?**

1. *Reduced public transport cost for young people.*

A review of young people’s accessibility to public transport system is required with the implementation of strategies to reduce the cost of public transport. Potential actions for consideration include the following:

* reduced concessional rates for young people to use public transport
* free public transport for healthcare card holders
* a youth related service to assist with the provision of free public transport tickets for ‘at risk’ young people who are required to travel on public transport for day program related proposes

1. *Youth specific training for public transport staff*

Specific ‘youth’ training for relevant public transport staff such as Protective Service Officers (PSOs) and ticket inspectors is recommended so that they can better equipped to engage with young people and develop a greater understanding of potential issues faced by young people. A community-minded approach towards enforcement would be welcomed.

**What else do you think should be done to improve the lives of young people in Victoria**?

**Other comments**

1. *Support for young people in ‘out of home’ care*

Whitehorse Youth Services agrees with the identification of young people in ‘out of home’ care as one of the most marginalised cohorts in our community. Intensive on-going services are required to support this vulnerable group of young people. Research into models of care from other countries may provide useful examples to potentially be implemented in Victoria. For instance, in some countries young people in ‘out of home’ care may remain in a supported foster place beyond 18 years of age which more accurately reflects the reality of young people today and a dependence on the family structure for a longer period of time.

1. *Support for families*

Throughout this submission by Whitehorse City Council Youth Services, the importance of supporting parents and families has been highlighted as a key strategy in support young people. The ‘family’ has a major influence on a young person’s life and can provide effective and responsive support if / when a young person is experiencing issue/s. Greater information and support should be provided to families to further develop their skills and knowledge to either prevent issues arising for young people, or deal with them more effectively when they become prevalent. The importance of families in working with young people is highlighted in the Whitehorse Municipal Youth Plan 2014 – 2018 with it being one of (the five) key directions. Families need to be adequately supported in raising healthy and resilience young people.

1. *Support for young people with dual diagnosis issues*

The prevalence of young people in our community presenting with issues in regard to their drug/ alcohol use and also mental health is becoming more commonplace. The co-existence of both issues is evident for young people presenting as complex / ‘at risk’. Young people in such instances require intensive support to address both issues. The Whitehorse Municipal Youth Plan 2014 - 2018 advocates for ‘increased government funding for dual diagnosis services and assistance for young people, in particular for complex cases involving drug / alcohol use and mental health issues’ (action 4.33).