

What's important to YOUth?

Submission on the development of a whole-
of government youth policy

November 2015

About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of 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 vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians in policy debates and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

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Executive Summary

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *What's important to YOUth? Discussion Paper* and contribute to the development of a new whole-of-government youth policy. We commend the government for the commitment articulated within the discussion paper to 'address gaps in supports, focusing on young people who are disadvantaged or facing particular challenges.'¹

While most young Victorians do well, many face challenges as they move from childhood to adulthood, including homelessness, mental health issues, family violence, abuse and neglect, drug and alcohol issues and involvement in the criminal justice system. One in five young people do not have anyone in their lives to turn to for help and support. Without appropriate and timely support, these challenges can and do have lifelong consequences — poorer health and wellbeing, lower education outcomes and poorer employment prospects, which are not only damaging for the individual but also costly for the wider community.²

In responding to the discussion paper, VCOSS sets out a range of fundamental approaches and elements that should underpin the new youth policy. While outside of the scope of the discussion paper questions, these provide some foundations for ensuring that a new youth policy:

- Maintains a focus on the strengths and rights of young people without focusing on a deficit approach to responding to disadvantage.
- Is highly responsive to the diverse needs of young people, without homogenizing young people's experiences or goals.
- Addresses both the structural and personal barriers young people can face to living fulfilling and happy lives and achieving their potential.
- Is youth centered, with a holistic focus on a young person's context to support them to thrive, such as family, community culture and place.
- Recognises the role of the community sector as partners in the delivery of policy objectives.

VCOSS also encourages the state government to consider issues beyond those raised within the discussion paper to be highly responsive to the needs of vulnerable young people. For example, the youth policy should include:

- Support for diversion and youth centred, integrated and holistic approaches to rehabilitation for young people who have contact with the justice system.

¹ *What's important to YOUth? Discussion Paper*, p. 10.

² VCOSS and YACVIC, *Building the scaffolding: strengthening support for young people in Victoria*, 2015

- Support for the enjoyment of cultural rights, including recognising the unique status of Victoria's Aboriginal communities, and approaches to cultural strengthening across education, the workforce, the services sector and communities.
- Support for young people to build healthy relationships to strengthen wellbeing and as a preventative strategy to reduce the incidence of family violence in Victoria.

The strategy should also consider the findings of other recent reforms that impact on young people such as the Education State, Review of Program for Students with Disabilities, and the Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children project, the Royal Commission into Family Violence, the 10 year Mental Health Strategy and the VET Funding Review . VCOSS' submissions to these consultation processes highlighted the impact of poverty and disadvantage on young people and the "double jeopardy" they face when they also experience, for example, living with disability, family dysfunction and violence, homelessness and mental health concerns. VCOSS members and the evidence point to clear ways forward to address these issues, but they do require fundamental systems change to implement youth and family centered models that will help young people live a good life and experience bright futures.

Approaches to underpin the Youth Policy

VCOSS believes that a whole-of-government youth policy should be underpinned by the following approaches.

Tackling poverty and structural disadvantage

While the majority of Victorians enjoy a relatively high standard of living and access to a range of universal services and opportunities, poverty and structural disadvantage still remains a barrier to this experience for many Victorians, including young people. Young people experience poverty living within families and as independent young adults. The *Dropping off the edge 2015* report, developed by Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Victoria describes geographic 'hot spots' of entrenched, complex disadvantage scattered across the state.³ The current gap in affordable housing within Victoria and poor transport networks in many outer suburban, regional and rural areas compound young people's disadvantage and create barriers to participation and social inclusion.

We also know that significant numbers of young people are more likely to be experiencing disadvantage due to structural inequalities such as: racism and discrimination within the community; shortcomings in the responsiveness of the education system to the needs of diverse young people; inflexibility within workplaces and a reliance on services that are not 'youth friendly'.

Additionally, significant structural barriers to participation and inclusion still exist for young people in Victoria with disabilities; young people who have a mental illness; young people who are refugees or newly arrived; Aboriginal young people; young people who are leaving out-of-home care or the justice system. These young people need specific attention within a whole-of-government youth policy that aims to alleviate disadvantage.

Building a whole-of-government approach

For a whole-of-government youth policy to be successful in achieving collaboration, siloed approaches to policy, planning and service provision must be overcome. Because of the interconnected range of issues and needs of young people, and the current design of the service system that is fragmented, genuine collective and collaborative 'co-design' approaches between

³ Vinson, T., Rawsthorne, M., Beavis, A. & Ericson, M. (2015) *Dropping off the edge 2015: Persistent communal disadvantage in Australia*. Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services. Available for download from <http://www.jss.org.au/component/content/article/5-pages/963-dote2015>

youth specific services, adult services, education, justice, police etc and young people themselves is needed. No one part of the service system alone can adequately support all young people to thrive.

All parts of government and the service system need to understand their relevance to young people, and see young people as legitimate stakeholders in policy and program development. A whole-of-government youth policy should clearly articulate this responsibility and the responsibility of all departments to collaborate to be responsive to young people.

VCOSS members report that collaborative approaches often work best when they are 'place-based' and focused at the local level. A number of existing structures allow for collaborative practice within the community and provide valuable mechanisms through which a whole-of-government approach may achieve outcomes. VCOSS recommends that the youth policy place a focus on the role of government in mapping the current efforts across departments related to improving outcomes for young people, identifying gaps, facilitating the sharing of relevant data to enable better provision of services and providing additional resources where they are needed.

Taking collaborative approaches

Improving outcomes for young people, particularly those facing disadvantage, will depend significantly upon the work of the community sector. VCOSS members report the best outcomes for young people, particularly those facing disadvantage and other challenges, will be achieved through a collaborative relationship between government and youth specific and community services.

Mechanisms for whole-of-government effort, such as Children and Youth Area Partnerships, require effective, two-way communication with the community and services sector. VCOSS members report that this communication could be strengthened within the current model.

The youth policy should clearly articulate the role of the youth and community services sectors as partners with government in addressing disadvantage experienced by young people. It should also express a commitment to working with community members and young people as partners.

Youth specific responses supporting young people in their families, communities, and culture

A whole-of-government policy approach that supports young people in their context is important. This includes enabling an appropriately 'family friendly' and 'youth specific' response within the traditionally 'adult' services system, so that young people within families in which adults are accessing services (such as mental health, drug and alcohol, homelessness, family violence and justice related services) can also have their needs addressed. Universal services that are inclusive and can respond to the needs of young people should be the platform on which the services system is built, with the ability to intensify the service response through more specialist secondary and tertiary services to provide greater assistance to young people facing disadvantage, including through specialist youth services.

The importance of a 'youth specific' service response is recognised as a fundamental element of the provision of accessible and effective support to young people. As the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) have clearly articulated through the *Code of Ethical Practice: A first step for the Victorian Youth Sector*, working well with young people involves understanding that young people sit within a context and that there are significant factors that play a key role in facilitating positive outcomes for young people, such as family, community and culture.

*Achieving positive outcomes for young people usually involves working closely with a range of people such as family or guardians, teachers, workers with other services and friends.*⁴

Cultural respect and strengthening is important to all young people, however it has a particular role to play in the lives of Aboriginal young people as members of a community that has had cultural rights actively undermined through a process of colonisation. Creating a community in which Aboriginal young people no longer face barriers to opportunities is inextricably linked to recognition and respect for culture, connection to land and community.

A human rights based approach

VCOSS recommends that the whole-of-government youth policy have a foundation in the recognition of young people's human rights and the role of the state government and the community in supporting young people to realise those rights. Doing so assists the government to meet its obligations under mechanisms such as *Victoria's Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. A policy approach that acknowledges the human rights of young people is likely to have high expectations of opportunities and outcomes for young people and does not become framed within a 'deficit approach'.

The *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* requires public authorities to act consistently with the human rights in the Charter. The development of a whole-of-government youth policy should consider the rights of young people as articulated in the Charter. Of note are the right to recognition and equality before the law (section 8), the right to protection of families and children (Section 17, through which children have the same rights as adults with added protection according to their best interests⁵), cultural rights (section 19) and the right to liberty and security of person (section 21).

The four core principles of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* also provide useful guidance to the development of a whole-of-government youth policy and (alongside the obligations of the state as articulated in the Victorian Charter) provide a strong foundation upon

⁴ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, (2007) *Code of Ethical Practice – A First Step for the Victorian Youth Sector*. Available for download from <http://www.yacvic.org.au/code> p.11.

⁵ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Rights under the charter* webpage <http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/index.php/the-charter/rights-under-the-charter> accessed 1/11/15.

which to situate the policy. They are ‘non-discrimination’, ‘the best interests of the child’, ‘the right to life, survival and development’, and ‘respect for the views of the child.’

Article 3.1 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, prescribes the core relevance of rights to the task of government policy development where it states that ‘in all actions concerning children whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.’

Reflecting the diversity of vulnerable young people

A whole-of-government youth policy should reflect and celebrate the diversity of Victorian young people. It should acknowledge the diversity of young people’s identities, experiences and needs.

Whilst a joined up whole-of-government approach to a youth policy holds the potential to support the provision of more comprehensive, holistic and youth friendly supports and opportunities to young people, there is also a risk that within a broad policy framework the diversity of young people’s needs can be lost.

As the discussion paper acknowledges, structural inequalities and embedded discrimination mean that there are barriers within our community that prevent all young people from accessing opportunities and resources equally.

VCOSS welcomes the focus within the discussion paper on the needs of young people who are likely to be facing challenges, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, young people with a disability, in out-of-home care, in the justice system, in rural and regional locations and those who are new arrivals, refugees and multicultural youth. VCOSS recommends the policy additionally include a clear articulation of its relevance to young people who are disengaged from education and employment, are long-term unemployed (or under-employed), those with mental illness, and young people experiencing poverty, family violence or live on the urban fringe.

Responding to the discussion paper questions

Response to the draft vision

VCOSS welcomes the focus on disadvantage within the draft vision for the youth policy, which is:

To maximise the opportunities and remove barriers for all young people aged 12 to 24 years to realise their potential, including those who are disadvantaged or face particular challenges.⁶

VCOSS members suggested removing the term 'maximise' and replacing it with rights-based language such as:

To recognise the right of all young people to equitable access to opportunities and work toward the realisation of those rights by removing barriers for all young people aged 12 to 24 years...

This would align with the Victorian government's obligations under the *Charter of Human Rights* and set suitably high expectations for outcomes for young people for a whole-of-government youth policy.

Response to the draft objectives

The discussion paper sets out the following draft objectives for the policy:

To ensure that the diverse and specific needs of young people, particularly those who are disadvantaged, disengaged or face particular challenges:

- *are heard and engaged by government in matters that affect them*
- *have the opportunity to participate in education, training and employment to secure their economic future*
- *are supported to prevent and address problems early*

⁶ *What's important to YOUth? Discussion Paper*, p. 15.

- *feel a sense of belonging, safety and connection with families, culture, local communities and civic society*
- *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.*⁷

VCOSS members suggested that the first objective could be strengthened to see young people as stakeholder partners in policy and program development that affects them, not just voices to be heard. We suggest the objective may be described as *'young people's voices are heard and respected and young people are engaged as partners in policy and program development processes.'*

VCOSS members were also concerned that the language of 'a fair go' was too vague as a policy objective, and suggested the objective clearly articulate an agenda to *'ensure equity and non-discrimination for all young people regardless of their cultural background etc....'*

⁷ Ibid.

Ensuring young people can thrive

The discussion paper identifies eight issues as important to young people and is seeking feedback on what should be done to improve outcomes in each of those areas. As mentioned earlier in this submission, VCOSS believes that the youth policy should not be restricted to tackling only these eight issues and has identified further issues of importance.

Create an inclusive and accessible education system with high expectations for all young people

Ensuring young people have equitable access to quality educational opportunities are fundamental to supporting them to realise their potential. Education can break cycles of poverty and reduce the impact of disadvantage.

Unfortunately the picture of educational opportunity across Australia shows significant disparity in the educational opportunities young people enjoy, with inequality growing within the system. Alarming, recent research tells us that around '26 per cent of young people do not attain a Year 12 or Certificate III equivalent by age 19.'⁸

Barriers to educational engagement relate not only to shortcomings in the capacity of the education system to retain young people as students, but also to the importance of addressing the systemic, situational and personal issues that can impact upon a students' experience and make educational engagement difficult. This includes the need to address what has been described as the 'soft bigotry of low expectations,' faced by the most vulnerable young people.

VCOSS recognises the commitment of the government to improving equitable access to education for young Victorians through *The Education State* initiatives. *The Education State* stakeholder and community engagement process identified a number of significant themes important to improving educational outcomes that are relevant to a whole-of-government youth policy, including:

- *Equitable access requires a flexible, inclusive and cohesive education system that is well resourced and supports the dynamic cultural and socioeconomic issues faced by children, parents and educators on a day-to-day basis.*

Victoria's education system needs to become more responsive to the needs of children, young people, their families and communities. For many young people, the education system does not offer the flexibility or inclusiveness needed to support their engagement and learning. Current rates of student disengagement from secondary schools are a testament to this.

Young people who disengage from education, or who are at-risk of disengaging require specialist, intensive case-management support through flexible support models with

⁸ Lamb, S., Jackson, J., Walstab, A. & Huo, S. (2015), *Educational Opportunities in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*. Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute. p.vi.

outreach capacity and the ability to work with a young person for periods of time that are long enough to meaningfully support re-engagement in education or an employment pathway. The loss of the federally funded Youth Connections Program in 2014 has left a significant gap in the availability of these critical services.

VCOSS warmly welcomes the announcement of the government's Navigator Pilot Program.⁹ It is important that this program incorporates the strengths of the former and highly successful Youth Connections program, including its flexibility, capacity to provide intensive case management support to help address complex barriers and provides outreach services to help reach the most disengaged young people in the community.

The education system needs to become significantly more responsive in relation to some cohorts of young people for whom educational retention is a particular challenge. Marked progress has been made in improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal young people, (including an increase in the number of Aboriginal students who completed Year 12 or equivalent in the vocational training sector by 68 per cent, from 189 in 2010 to 317 in 2013¹⁰) However, ongoing focus is required to improve the capacity of schools to offer a culturally safe learning environment within which Aboriginal young people can thrive.

Currently, interdepartmental approaches to improve the educational outcomes of vulnerable young people can be seen in relation to young people in out-of-home care as well as young people in the justice system. The partnering agreement between the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is an example of an interdepartmental commitment to improving educational outcomes for young people in care. Similarly, the interdepartmental approach between the DHHS and DET in the delivery of education to young people in the justice system through Parkville College is another example of the opportunities that can be created through cross-departmental effort.

- *Significant investment in infrastructure and flexible learning structures are required to engage and re-engage students from diverse backgrounds.*

VCOSS members report the need for more flexible learning opportunities for young people to improve the educational engagement of diverse young people.

- *Student safety and wellbeing is fundamental to effective learning and development. It must be proactively addressed as a broader issue of social welfare, and appropriately funded to meet the complex needs of all students.*

⁹ Department of Education and Training, *Navigator Pilot Program*, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/navigator.aspx>

¹⁰. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2010) *Garrin Garrin: A Strategy to Improve Learning and Development Outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians*. p.10.

VCOSS members report that schools face challenges in delivering student wellbeing initiatives, including: difficulty in recognising student needs; difficulty in taking advantage of the resources of youth and community services offering to work with them to deliver wellbeing programs; and challenges in knowing with confidence how best to invest in wellbeing initiatives. A focus is needed on building the internal capacity of schools to take full advantage of the opportunities that youth and community services can offer. Currently there is disparity between schools in terms of capacity in this area. All schools need staff with expertise to identify the wellbeing needs of their students; develop quality whole-of-school wellbeing frameworks that are evidence driven; engage with youth and community services with confidence in meaningful partnership approaches to delivering programs and supporting students and their families.

- *Improvement is required to increase continuity and integration across learning and career pathways.*

VCOSS members report significant concerns that young people are completing secondary education, including the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), without the skills to be 'job ready'. Additionally, both services and young people report a need to further develop the 'life-skills' of young people, to support their employability, such as interpersonal and communication skills, flexibility and capacity to problem solve and confidence in what to expect when engaging in further education or training or seeking employment opportunities. Funding cuts to VCAL have reduced the capacity of the program to give students the skills they need and further investment is required to address this shortfall.

- *Businesses need to work together with the education system to promote pathways and to ensure that education delivers appropriate skill-sets for industry.*

VCOSS members also identified the importance of students developing highly relevant vocational skills in order to support their employability – an area for improvement within the education system. Businesses have a key role to play in informing the development of highly relevant skill-sets as well as creating local opportunities for young people to access training and employment.

- *Closer connections between the school and the local community create opportunities for all parents to be engaged in their child's education journey.*

Community and youth services can play a key role in supporting community engagement with schools, offering advice and support to schools to increase their accessibility to diverse parents. For some families experiencing vulnerabilities, achieving engagement with a school can have particular challenges and can be supported when family, youth or other community services work in effective partnership with local schools.

Help young people facing disadvantage gain vocational skills and training

The provision of quality Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Victoria is essential for the community and economy. VET provides a key pathway to employment for young people, thereby supporting their financial independence and engagement with the community. VET also provides an essential pathway for vulnerable young people to engage in education and access training.

Unfortunately relatively recent changes in funding arrangements and cuts in funding for some providers resulted in:

- declining student enrolments, particularly among some vulnerable learner groups
- a significant decline in the financial viability of the TAFE sector
- a range of quality concerns.

VCOSS acknowledges the significant investment made by the state government into VET, including TAFE. The current VET funding review has provided a welcome opportunity to input into the development of a stronger VET system in Victoria.

In the [VCOSS submission to the VET funding review](#) a range of recommendations were made to help make the VET system accessible to those in our community who may face barriers to accessing vocational education, and for the VET system to provide a pathway to meaningful employment, including:

- Recognising the role and value of TAFEs, including reinstating funding loadings that adequately reflect the additional costs of delivering training in the TAFE sector.
- Ensuring the VET system delivers quality programs and outcomes.
- Better aligning the VET system with employment opportunities.
- Improving enrolment rates and engagement of early school leavers and at-risk young people.
- Supporting the engagement and enrolment of those who face barriers to accessing the VET system.
- Protecting the needs of young people and adult learners facing disadvantage, through improved quality control mechanisms and complaints processes.
- Introducing exemptions to up-skill requirements for government subsidised training.
- Ensuring VET meets the education and training needs of the community services workforce.

The [VCOSS response to the VET Funding Review Issues Paper](#) built on this earlier submission and outlined further opportunities for the VET sector to better meet and protect the needs of Victoria's vulnerable learners. Some of the key issues highlighted include:

- Recognising the role of both the public and not-for-profit vocational education and training services in providing vulnerable learners with educational opportunities, and supporting high needs students.

- Adequately funding the community obligation activities of training providers to support students' wellbeing as well as their education and employment outcomes.
- Supporting and protecting students through a range of measures, including providing vulnerable students with access to high quality, independent advice about training and career choices.
- Recognising the community and health services sector as an important and growing employer and ensuring the VET system supports a highly qualified and well-supported workforce.
- Ensuring that the VET system is aligned to labour market priorities and skills shortage areas, but in doing so, adequately reflect regional labour market needs as well as entry level or re-entry workforce opportunities, particularly at the local level.

Create employment pathways for young people

Youth unemployment within Victoria sits at unacceptably high levels. VCOSS analysis of the most recent ABS data shows that Victoria ended 2014 with the highest recorded yearly average youth unemployment rate since the 1990s, at 14.6 per cent for the year.¹¹ Some population groups also experience unacceptably high rates of unemployment including Aboriginal Victorians (who are three times more likely than other Victorians to be out of work with an unemployment rate of almost 19 per cent)¹² and people with a disability (with Australia ranking 21st out of 29 OECD countries in the employment participation rate for people with a disability).¹³ A whole-of-government youth policy should articulate the need for an interdepartmental effort to address youth unemployment and under-employment in Victoria, including a particular focus on those young people facing compounded disadvantage.

Last year, VCOSS released the discussion paper *Tackling Unemployment: Towards a workforce participation plan for all*.¹⁴ It sets out four interlinked strategies for tackling unemployment, all of which have specific relevance to a whole-of-government youth policy. The plan calls for government, the community services and business sectors to work collaboratively to achieve the following strategies:

- Build vulnerable people's skills and capacities (including a focus on supporting the retention of young people who have disengaged or are at-risk of disengaging from education; building a strong and sustainable VET system and building community

¹¹ VCOSS Snapshot: Youth Unemployment in Victoria and Melbourne's North. April 2015. Available for download from <http://vcoss.org.au/blog/vcoss-snapshot-youth-unemployment-in-victoria-and-northern-metro/>. Accessed 4/11/15.

¹² ABS, *Labour force characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Estimates from the Labour Force Survey 2011*, Table 1.

¹³ Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, *Sickness, disability and work: keeping on track in the economic downturn – background paper*, OECD, 2009.

¹⁴ VCOSS (2014) *Tackling Unemployment: Towards a workforce participation plan for all*. Available for download at <http://vcoss.org.au/documents/2014/11/Tackling-unemployment.pdf>

based education and employment pathways through partnerships between community services and employers).

- Create the jobs vulnerable people need, where they need them (with a focus on place-based initiatives that promote large-scale employment initiatives near where vulnerable groups live).
- Develop inclusive and flexible workplaces (by supplementing federal government wage subsidies to help vulnerable and low-skilled jobseekers overcome barriers, addressing systemic cultural and attitudinal barriers of employers, promoting flexible working arrangements and creating employment equity targets).
- Improve labour mobility and availability (through delivering a plan for affordable housing in job-rich locations and investing in a high quality public transport network, so vulnerable people will have greater chance of accessing and maintaining secure jobs).

As was mentioned earlier in this submission in relation to increasing young people's educational opportunities, young people need support to become 'job-ready', both through a stronger focus on the development of skills that support employability in secondary school and particularly through the VCAL and Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) programs, and through more intensive, case-managed support for young people facing barriers to employment and requiring further assistance.

Significant gaps exist in terms of services that can support vulnerable young people to become 'job-ready' and find employment. Prior to 2013, a number of youth pre-employment programs were funded by the then Department of Business Innovation. These targeted vulnerable young people, such as early school leavers, young people experiencing mental health problems or family breakdown and young people involved with the youth justice, justice and out-of-home-care systems. The programs offered holistic support to address issues affecting the young person's job readiness (such as housing, health and wellbeing or family issues) and offered support to employers to recruit and retain these young people.

The loss of these programs, alongside the defunding of the federal Youth Connections program in 2014, has meant young people are not getting the support they need. VCROSS recognises that the new federal 'Transitions to Work' program will provide an avenue for support to disengaged young people aged between 15 and 21, however not all young people will access this program.

Focus on early intervention to improve the mental health of young people

Mission Australia's 2014 Youth Mental Health Report found that more than one in five young people who completed the survey met criteria for a probable mental illness.¹⁵ Improving young

¹⁵ Mission Australia (2014), *Youth Mental Health Report*, p.4

people's access to mental health support is essential to supporting their wellbeing as well as ensuring their capacity to engage fully in opportunities for participation.

Early intervention is key to reducing the impact of mental ill-health on individual wellbeing and on the community. An early intervention response should be multi-faceted and incorporate interventions that are 'early in life, early in illness and episode.' Improving young people's mental health literacy and access to support underpins the potential for a successful early intervention approach. Adolescence and early adulthood are the times in life when mental health concerns most often first appear – with a half of all lifetime mental illnesses emerging by age 14 and three quarters by age 24.¹⁶ Early intervention is enabled through the provision of services and resources at this end of the service spectrum, without young people needing to wait long periods of time for support, risking a further deterioration in their mental health. Early intervention is also enabled by improving awareness about mental health; addressing stigma associated with mental health and help-seeking; signs and symptoms that someone may need support with their mental health; how to access support; and how to be a supportive friend, parent or caring adult in the life of someone with a mental health problem. This awareness needs to be developed in those people who spend the most time with young people and who have trusting relationships with young people (such as parents, peers, schools, higher education providers, workplaces).

Early intervention mental health responses need to target young people where they are. While there are times that young people need to access a clinical mental health response within a specialist mental health or hospital service setting, young people's access to prevention and early intervention mental health support can be maximised through effective use of universal service platforms such as schools. Families and family services can also be central to strengthening protective factors in young people's mental health, identifying signs of mental ill-health, enabling early access to mental health support and supporting recovery.

For young people who are interfacing with service systems such as out-of-home care or justice, access to mental health support is of paramount concern. Given the prevalence of trauma in the life experience of these young people, the insights we now have into the impact of trauma on brain development and the often complex needs that these experiences result in, it is important that young people access mental health support early and as they need it.

The value of 'youth specific' mental health support is well understood as is the important role that youth service can play in prevention and early intervention and in linking young people to specialist mental health supports. It is concerning that there are still significant gaps in the provision of youth specific mental health services across the spectrum of prevention, early intervention and tertiary/clinical supports. A 2013 survey of the youth sector in Victoria by VCOSS and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, reported mental health support as the third greatest unmet need.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid, p.8.

¹⁷ VCOSS & YACVic, (2013), *Building the Scaffolding: Strengthening Support for Young People in Victoria*. p.53. Available for download from <http://www.yacvic.org.au/news/415-building-the-scaffolding-strengthening-support-for-young-people-in-victoria> Accessed 4/11/15.

Community sector representatives report concerns that the recommissioned community mental health support services (CMHSS) central intake system is confusing for young people. There are also concerns that eligibility for support through both the CMHSS and NDIS systems usually requires a permanent disability and a diagnosis, which are usually not provided to people under the age of 24. The state government can help young people access community mental health services when and where they need them by creating clear pathways for young people to access services and by maintaining and increasing funding to targeted youth mental health services across the state, outside of the NDIS.

Also key to accessibility of support is the provision of culturally appropriate mental health programs and services. VCOSS acknowledges the specific focus of some youth specific mental health providers on targeting Aboriginal young people to increase their access to support. Alongside improving the capacity of generalist services to provide culturally appropriate service to Aboriginal young people and families, VCOSS believes there would be significant value in supporting the development of the Aboriginal workforce in this area so as to enable more youth mental health related roles within Aboriginal services (as is in line with self-determination principles) and the employment of more Aboriginal mental health workers in services more broadly.

Similarly newly arrived or refugee young people who have experienced trauma or dislocation benefit from a culturally sensitive, trauma-informed mental health response that reflects a strong understanding of those experiences.

The interrelationship between mental health, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, educational - engagement, job readiness and social connectedness make clear the importance of joined-up approaches to service delivery, 'wrap-around' supports and policy development. Poverty and structural disadvantage also impact directly on health and wellbeing, including mental health by creating situational stressors that can induce mental ill-health and make seeking support challenging.

A whole-of-government youth policy should support a cross-departmental approach to ensuring the availability of youth-specific mental health supports to young people along the service spectrum of prevention, early intervention, specialist/tertiary services. This should include a focus on accessibility through the provisions of youth specific services to young people within their context (such as young people in schools, within families (including where an adult in that family is accessing support services), in VET and university education settings, in out-of-home care and justice.

Support young people with alcohol and other drug issues with youth-specific services

Tackling alcohol and drug issues for young people in Victoria should rightfully be a strong priority of a whole-of-government youth policy. As a recent report from the Youth Substance Abuse Service describes:

*Substance misuse and dependence is the most common and potentially harmful of all complex issues faced by young people in Victoria. There is strong evidence that an investment in alcohol and drug prevention, early intervention and treatment at the local level can modify the risks to young people and protect the health and wellbeing of families and communities.*¹⁸

As 'the only state with a comprehensive and fully integrated Youth AOD service system,'¹⁹ Victoria can be described as leading the way in the provision of youth alcohol and other drug (AOD) services. However, young people in Victoria still face barriers to accessing the support they need and the youth AOD service system needs to be supported to meet unmet need and continue to develop effective and responsive practice models, including collaborative practice approaches.

In particular, access to services needs to be improved for young people and families in rural and remote parts of the state and those living in urban fringe areas.²⁰ Also, particular cohorts of young people have been identified as requiring more effective responses from youth AOD services, including young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Pacific Island and Maori and from backgrounds, young people who are refugees and unaccompanied minors, young women, lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex and queer young people, young parents and those in out-of-home care.²¹

Results from the Statewide Youth Needs Census, presented in a 'Snapshot report' by the Youth Substance Abuse Service and Turning Point illustrates the complexity of factors impacting on a survey sample of 1000 young people accessing alcohol and drug services in 2013:

*Young people attending AOD services have extremely high levels of psychological, social, educational, legal, housing and mental health problems. Two thirds have criminal justice system involvement; two thirds have significant family problems.*²²

This makes clear the critical importance of an integrated approach between youth AOD services and other youth and community services. Drawing on this research, service reviews, other contemporary research, and an analysis of current policy imperatives in Victoria, the Youth Substance Abuse Service, the Centre for Youth AOD Practice Development and Youth Drugs and Alcohol Advice have articulated a 'Ten Point Action Plan' to further enhance the service system.²³ A whole-of-government youth policy could include a commitment, not only to interdepartmental collaboration, including interdepartmental investment in programs and services, but also to working

¹⁸ Bruun, A. (2015) *The Victorian Youth Alcohol and Other Drug Service System: A vision realised*. Youth Support and Advocacy Service, Melbourne. p.8.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.4.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.27.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² YSAS & Turning Point (2014) *Snapshot March 2014: Young people in Victorian Youth alcohol and other drug services. Summary data & Key Findings*. p.4. Available for download at http://www.ysas.org.au/sites/default/files/SNAPSHOT_StatewideYouthNeedsCensus.pdf

²³ Bruun, A. (2015) *The Victorian Youth Alcohol and Other Drug Service System: A vision realised*. Youth Support and Advocacy Service, Melbourne.

with the youth AOD and broader youth and community services sectors to support the realisation of the ten point action plan. The plan calls for the following actions:

- prioritise young people that are most at risk
- maximise capacity for early intervention
- focus on proactive engagement and treatment retention
- ensure youth AOD services are fully integrated with other youth and health service systems
- create capacity for services to involve families and carers
- adopt an evidence-based, trauma-informed care framework
- maintain an emphasis on psychosocial stability as the basis of all behaviour change
- create options to increase the social and economic participation of youth AOD clients
- build capacity to identify and respond to emerging AOD related needs in youth populations
- incorporate the participation of young people and families in developing and maintaining high quality services.²⁴

The policy could also clearly articulate the need for a whole-of-government approach to address alcohol and drug abuse within the Victorian community, including a culture of harmful alcohol consumption that influences young people's own substance use.

Ensure young people live in safe and secure homes

Young people in Victoria face significant barriers to accessible housing - within the rental market, as prospective property owners and in relation to public housing. As housing costs continue to rise to record levels, there remains a severe shortage of social housing, making it increasingly difficult for people to find secure, stable homes. Home ownership has become prohibitive for first time home-buyers (unable to break into the market or only able to afford housing in infrastructure poor fringe suburbs of metro or regional areas).

Rental markets have also become increasingly competitive and expensive. The proportion of Melbourne's private rental listings classified as affordable by DHHS has plummeted over the last decade, from nearly 30 per cent, to less than 10 per cent.²⁵

Within this context, young people face specific barriers to accessible housing, including discrimination within the rental market (particularly where a young person doesn't have a rental history) and greater reliance on public transport networks (limiting the pool of geographically appropriate housing). Young people also typically have a more limited income to spend on housing. Aside from the significant levels of unemployment or underemployment within the youth cohort, young people tend to occupy more junior work roles, are often restricted to working part-time while juggling work and study, or may be reliant on income support.

²⁴ Ibid, p.3.

²⁵ DHHS, *Affordable Lettings by LGA March 2000 – September 2014*.

Young people experience homelessness as members of families needing homelessness support and also as individuals. Holistic, wrap-around models of support to address homelessness, with links to educational and employment opportunities and through which young people also receive personal support to address additional challenges they may be experiencing (such as support with mental health or substance abuse) are needed.

Young people leaving care and young people exiting the justice system need to be guaranteed access to stable, long-term and affordable housing. Young people who are parents, or expectant parents and who have been identified as vulnerable within the child protection system also need access to stable, long-term affordable housing.

Young people, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, would benefit from innovative social housing programs tailored to their needs. For example, supported and subsidised share-house models of social housing, that group young adults together, where appropriate. Similarly, rental brokerage programs to support the establishment of shared student housing arrangements could also be explored.

VCOSS members also recommended exploring models of social housing, through which adolescents and young adults identified as at risk of homelessness can access some supported 'time-out' from families, as well as mental health and behavioural support programs.

In our 2015-16 State Budget Submission, VCOSS called for the development of a whole-of-government affordable housing strategy 'that effectively tackles Victoria's housing crisis and helps ensure everyone can have a safe, secure and affordable home.' Within such a strategy, a specific focus on addressing barriers to housing for young people is required. A whole-of-government youth policy provides an opportunity to place a focus on the need for an inter-departmental effort to over-come the particular challenges that young people face in relation to accessing affordable housing and overcoming homelessness.

Ensure young people are free from discrimination

The diversity of young people means that some young people are more likely to experience discrimination, racism, sexism and barriers to social inclusion than others. Groups of young people who report experiencing particularly high levels of discrimination include: young people with a disability; Aboriginal young people; young people from culturally diverse backgrounds; young people with experience of a mental illness; young people with an experience of drug and alcohol abuse; young people who have had contact with the justice system; LGBTI young people; and young women. The multi-faceted nature of young people's identities means that some young people are vulnerable to discrimination on a range of fronts, compounding their vulnerability.

Young people experiencing poverty, from lower socio-economic backgrounds or in fringe or rural and remote areas often face particular barriers to social inclusion impacted upon by financial stress, infrastructure limitations including poor transport, and a lack of service or participation opportunities due to service gaps. Addressing these experiences of discrimination need to be a

priority, with a whole-of-government youth policy seeking to engage all departments to challenge the cultural and structural elements of discrimination. In terms of the policy development process, a whole-of-government youth policy should require all departments to engage young people meaningfully in policy development processes.

There are also ways in which young people are discriminated against as an age cohort within society that have broad reaching impacts on their capacity to enjoy their rights and reach their potential.

Broadly speaking, young people experience age-based discrimination in areas such as:

- Being denied opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that impact upon them: young people are often excluded from discussions and decision-making forums in which decisions are made that have a profound impact upon their lives.
- Employment: youth unemployment figures illustrate the disproportionate impact unemployment has on young people. The reluctance of employers to give young people with limited experience an opportunity is a factor, particularly in the case of vulnerable young people.
- Access to housing: young people with limited or no rental background face discrimination in the rental housing market, limiting their opportunities within an already prohibitive housing market.²⁶

To help address discrimination and strengthen young people's access and sense of belonging, the government could focus on improving the capacity of universal, secondary and tertiary services to be inclusive and accessible for all young people, and use education as a key tool in addressing discrimination. For example, through the broad implementation of respectful relationships and Aboriginal cultural strengthening and language programs in schools. VCOSS also recommends an empowering, participatory approach to addressing discrimination that sees young people as partners through schools, services and participatory programs like the Youth Disability Advocacy Service, the Centre for Multicultural Youth and the Koorie Youth Council.

Create accessible public transport for young people

Access to reliable, regular and accessible public transport is essential to supporting young people to engage in education, training and employment, access critical services, and participate in social and community activities that promote wellbeing and community connectedness. VCOSS welcomed the significant state government investment made in the 2015-16 Budget to public transport²⁷. Access to public transport however, remains a significant barrier to participation for many young people, particularly those in geographically isolated areas (fringe, rural and regional

²⁶ Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2012) *Locked Out: Discrimination in Victoria's Private Rental Market*. Available for download at file:///Users/jenniferrose/Downloads/Locked_out_Discrimination_in_Victorias_private_rental_market.pdf p.12.

²⁷ VCOSS (2015), *2015-16 State Budget Snapshot: expand transport options*. Available for download at <http://vcoss.org.au/blog/2015-16-state-budget-snapshot-expand-transport-options/> Accessed 4/11/15.

areas) of the state and young people with disabilities reliant on limited accessible transport options.²⁸

Poorer access to public transport is linked to economic vulnerability. The majority of Melbourne's low-cost private rental dwellings have poor public transport access, and only 7 per cent have very good access.²⁹ This is a significant issue for young people as they face particular barriers to accessing affordable housing but have a greater reliance on public transport.

Improving young people's access to public transport needs to involve expanding public transport networks and getting smarter with the ways we use existing community transport resources.

As VCOSS recently stated in response to the Regional Transport Development Plan:

...(S)iloed responses mean that the resources cannot be combined to facilitate multi-purpose trips by different groups of people, meaning that they overlook opportunities to generate efficiencies from economies of scale. By restructuring these with a greater focus on funding transport outcomes, rather than inputs, and allowing them to be applied to a wider range of shared transport services and infrastructure, access could be improved.³⁰

Arrangements to extend the availability of school buses to other people within the community, for example TAFE students, apprentices or individuals accessing services warrant investigation, particularly in fringe and rural and regional areas.

Patterns of public transport use by young people should also be considered in options to improve access. Young people frequently require public transport that is outside of 'peak' transport times for the broader community, including mid-afternoon, evening and weekend services. Planning and investment in public transport needs to ensure young people can access public transport when they need it.

Cost remains a significant barrier to public transport access for economically vulnerable young people. For example, a yearly myki Victorian student pass requires an upfront payment of \$525.00³¹. Not only does the cost of public transport impair young people's access to vital services, education and employment it also heightens the likelihood of fare evasion and interaction with PSOs (with the potential for escalation within that interaction particularly for young people with a mental health or drug and alcohol problem). Young people are then caught in a regulatory regime that involves a prohibitive fine, serving only to exacerbate their economic vulnerability.

²⁸ The Youth Disability Advocacy Service outlined a range of concerns related to transport access for young people with a disability in their *Submission to the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (Transport Standards) 2012 Review*. Available for download at <http://www.ydas.org.au/policy-corner/>. Accessed 4/11/15.

²⁹ T Burke & J Stone, *Transport disadvantage and low-income rental housing*, AHURI Positioning Paper No.157, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2014, p. 29.

³⁰ VCOSS (2015) *Regional Transport Development Plan: VCOSS Submission to Public Transport Victoria*. p.12. Available for download from http://vcoss.org.au/documents/2015/09/SUB_150911_Regional-Transport-Development-Plan-FINAL.pdf Accessed 4/11/15.

³¹ Public Transport Victoria, *Metropolitan myki fares 2015* webpage <http://ptv.vic.gov.au/tickets/metropolitan-myki-fares/> Accessed 4/11/15.

VCOSS recommends that a whole-of-government youth strategy require an inter-departmental approach to adapting ticketing products to improve vulnerable young people's access to a valid ticket. This should engage youth and community services, and may involve subsidised tickets, fortnightly payment plans or simply lowering the costs of tickets for families and young people identified to be economically vulnerable.

Adopt justice reinvestment approaches to address the reasons young people offend

As mentioned earlier in this submission, VCOSS recommends that the youth policy also focus on young people in the youth justice and justice systems. The relationship between abuse and neglect and offending behaviour is well understood as is the correlation between geographic disadvantage and higher offending rates. An early intervention focus on supporting young people will improve outcomes in relation to reduced offending. Also needed is an expansion of the availability of diversion to encompass all young people under the age of 18.

Post-release supports to young people also need to be strengthened. Intensive, case-managed support needs to be ongoing, with support for families included. While these service interventions are costly, curbing recidivism is a worthwhile investment.

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