



Submission to
VULNERABLE YOUTH FRAMEWORK
DISCUSSION PAPER

30 September 2008

'If our answer to young people is that "Sorry, we can't help you", we are failing in our duty of care and commitment to young people.'

Youth service provider, Melbourne.¹

Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS works to ensure that all Victorians have access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services, through advocating for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS members reflect a wide diversity, with members ranging from large charities, sector peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals in social policy debates.

VCOSS Vision

VCOSS is committed to living out the principles of equity and justice, and acknowledges we live in a society where people are interdependent of one another. VCOSS respects the land we live in and recognises the Indigenous custodians of the country. VCOSS is committed to reconciling all injustices with Indigenous Australians.

The VCOSS vision is one where social well being is a national priority, and:

- Ensures everyone has access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services
- Involves all people as equals, without discrimination; and
- Values and encourages people's participation in decision making about their own lives and their community.

Vulnerable Youth Framework Discussion Paper

*'It is expected that the Vulnerable Youth Framework will, over time, strengthen and develop a coordinated service system for vulnerable young people.'*²

VCOSS and VCOSS members have a strong interest in the development of the Vulnerable Youth Framework and a commitment to ensuring that all young people achieve their full potential.

Currently in Victoria, there is no formal integrated youth services system, meaning that the needs of young people are not adequately met.³ VCOSS welcomes the development of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* (the *Framework*) and the opportunities that this brings to develop and invest in a youth service system that is universally accessible for all young Victorians. The *Framework* is an important first step towards developing a youth service system that supports the health and wellbeing of all young people.

The *Vulnerable Youth Framework* provides an opportunity to:

- Develop and invest in generalist youth services;
- Develop and invest in a continuum of integrated youth services;
- Improve collaborations between schools, community service organisations and government;
- Resource local planning and collaboration between all organisations providing services and supports to young people;
- Develop a Statewide Strategic Framework for Youth Services;
- Better support the outcomes of particular groups of vulnerable young people; and,
- Build a strong and capable system of services and professionals.

Who is a 'young person'?

Previous Victorian Government youth policy, initiatives and projects, such as *Future Directions* and the *State of Victoria's Young People* report, define young people as those who fall within the 12 to 24/25 years age range. VCOSS supports this definition, with most youth services in Victoria offering services to this age range.⁴ However, the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* targets young people ages 10-25 years. VCOSS is concerned about the proposed age Framework and the definitions of vulnerability that are detailed in the *Framework* discussion paper. This is discussed in further detail later in the submission.

Who is a 'vulnerable' young person?

VCOSS welcomes the focus of the *Framework* on improving the outcomes of all young people. VCOSS believes that it is vital that the *Framework* be based on *The Victorian Child and Adolescent Outcomes Framework*, and that these outcomes are used to monitor the impact and effectiveness of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*.

The conceptual model used within the *Framework* to depict the layers of vulnerability is supported by VCOSS. In particular, we believe that the *Framework* has the opportunity to drive investment in services to support those young people who are

within level 2 and 3. These young people are currently missing out on vital services and supports. However, targeted work is also required for those level 4 young people. In addition, all young people can potentially benefit if the *Framework* is used to develop a universally available system of supports.

The risk factors articulated in the *Framework* individualise risk, rather than focusing on structural risk factors, such as if a young person is an asylum seeker, same sex-attracted or if they are experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage.

VCOSS is concerned that the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* is informed by a deficit model, rather than a strengths-based model. This is evident in how where a young person has a high rate of absenteeism, that *Vulnerable Youth Framework* constructs this as the young person's failing or fault, rather than identifying that there is a clear need to address the school system and its responsiveness and capacity to engage vulnerable young people in education. VCOSS believes that it is essential that the final *Framework* is informed by a strengths-based approach, rather than a deficit model.

The risk factors that are detailed in the *Framework* apply more to 13-18 year olds, rather than 10-12 year olds or 18-25 year olds. For example, it would be concerning if a ten year old was engaging in the low risk activity of 'being sexually active but generally using contraception'. Therefore it is important that in the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*, and in other policy mechanisms, that there are targeted initiatives and indicators for these age groups that take into account more appropriate risk factors.

Middle Childhood

VCOSS welcomes the emphasis of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* on improving the way that schools work with young people, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary school. While VCOSS believes that children aged 10-12 years often require support during this time in their development, youth services may not be the most appropriate supports for these children.

Research undertaken by VCOSS and YACVic, as part of the *Who's Carrying the Can* report, surveyed youth service providers who reported concerns that the support needs of children aged between 8 and 12 years old, the middle years, were not being met by the youth service system.⁵

The middle years encompasses the period up until a child reaches adolescence and is a significant time for children's development, where children develop social skills, build their capacity to relate to the outside world and have a desire to 'fit in', which impacts on self-esteem.⁶

VCOSS is concerned that currently children and young people in the middle years are missing out on support because they fall through the gaps in current policy and service development. For example, the early years agenda encompasses children 0-8, while this *Framework* goes from 10-25 – it appears that 9 year olds are seemingly trapped in a policy vacuum. Targeted middle childhood responses that recognise the specific needs of this age group are urgently required.

It is vital that the needs of children and young people are met in ways that are developmentally appropriate. For example, while some 12 year olds may be able to

meaningfully participate in a youth service, some 13 year olds may be more comfortable attending a children's services. Therefore, VCOSS believes it is crucial that the *Framework* is both age and developmentally focused.

Young Adults

The approach taken to providing services and supports to ensure good outcomes for young adults 18-25 years needs to be different to that which is provided to other young people. These young people are overlooked in the discussion paper. A key question that needs to be addressed in the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* is how are outcomes for this group of young people to be measured, and who is working with these young people – because currently it is not, in many cases, youth services.

If the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* is to encompass young people aged 18-25 years, it is vital that there is a greater understanding of this age cohort. Young people who are 18-25 years need to be adequately consulted in the development of the *Framework* as to what are their needs and what services and support they require.

A whole-of-government approach – implementation and sustainability

VCOSS welcomes the whole of government approach that has informed the development of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*, in particular the sign-off on the document from four Government Ministers. This highlights the importance of Government working better within its own structures to better support young people achieving their full potential.

As identified by Jake Chapman in his two *System failure* publications:

‘the current model of public policy making, based on the reduction of complex problems into separate, rationally manageable components, is no longer appropriate to the challenges faced by governments and changes to the wider environment in which they operate.’⁷

Implementing a systems practice involves significant change from the traditional approach and processes employed by government. This is evident ‘in that:

- ❑ interventions would be based upon learning what works, on an ongoing basis, rather than specifying targets to be met.
- ❑ the priority would be to improve overall system performance, as judged by the end-users of the system not just by Ministers or civil servants
- ❑ the policy making process would focus on the processes of improvement, rather than the control of the agencies involved
- ❑ engagement with agents and stakeholders would be based more upon listening and co-researching rather than on telling and instructing. Responsibility for innovation and improvement would be widely distributed.⁸

The *Vulnerable Youth Framework* provides the opportunity to drive the significant change required across government and all the systems and structures that support and promote the wellbeing, learning, health and development of children and young people.

Existing mechanisms, such as the *DHS / DEECD Partnering Agreement*, are based on little more than rhetoric and according to some VCOSS members, are not working

effectively. What is required are strong and meaningful cross-department commitments and ways of working.

VCOSS is concerned that there is not strong theme in the *Framework* about Government leadership. In many of the proposals put forward in the discussion paper, there is an underlying assumption that it will just happen – there are no specifics around which Government department will have responsibility for implementation. Given the fragmented nature of the youth services system, cohesive leadership is required.

VCOSS believes that it is vital that both an implementation and sustainability plan be developed to guide the development and roll-out of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*. It is also vital that this is accompanied by an investment plan that will ensure recurrent funding for youth services.

Increased funding is also central to achieving the objectives of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*. VCOSS is concerned that the discussion paper does not address the current fragmentation of funding mechanisms for not only youth services, but also other community services that provide support to young people. Before the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* can be developed and implemented successfully, further consideration and articulation is required of how the Government will develop new funding mechanisms that are coordinated and joined-up.

VCOSS believes that the *Framework* provides a valuable opportunity for Government to build on the outcomes of the *Victorian Government's Action Plan for Stronger Community Organisations* (the outcome of the Strengthening Community Organisations Project – SCOP), and engage with the youth services sector around the question of fragmentation and what steps the Government can take to better resource the service system.

It is essential that the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* links with a broader structural reform agenda. It is vital that the *Framework*, and any initiatives stemming from it, are linked to existing Government frameworks and strategies, such as the *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*, *Victorian Government's Action Plan for Stronger Community Organisations*, the soon to be released Mental Health Strategy and the *Youth Homelessness Action Plan*. If Victoria is to achieve a truly integrated system of supports for young people across the continuum, it is vital that there are linkages, otherwise there is the risk of duplication and a system that is not cohesive.

Focus Area One: Prevention and Early Intervention

VCOSS welcomes the focus of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* on the areas of prevention and early identification. Investment in prevention, early identification and intervention, as part of a continuum of youth-focused services, provides young people with crucial supports before they reach crisis point.

Prevention strategies

VCOSS welcomes the commitment in the *Framework* to the development of prevention strategies, however this needs to go beyond ensuring that existing prevention strategies are coordinated and accessible. There is also the need for the development and investment in new prevention strategies and supports.

Local government appears to be given a significant role in the development of prevention strategies. The discussion paper details that LGAs should have a range of prevention strategies in place for vulnerable young people. A key question remains as to who is resourcing these strategies. Some LGAs have developed excellent local youth strategies, while others do not fund or provide youth services. LGAs currently receive limited funding to provide youth services. It therefore seems inappropriate for local government to direct a service system that they do not fund.

What is required is significant investment in the development of not only prevention strategies but also in generalist youth services and other supports for vulnerable young people. This will enable the adequate implementation of prevention strategies.

Early identification mechanisms

VCOSS believes that any mechanisms that are developed for identifying vulnerability early need to be informed by research and be based on the *Victorian Child and Adolescent Outcomes Framework*.

It is also unclear who will be developing and resourcing these mechanisms. Any strategies that are developed need to be accompanied by adequate resource materials and training. These strategies can also not be developed in isolation, there needs to also be a youth service system for these young people to be referred to once they have been identified as vulnerable.

Positive family relationships

VCOSS believes that it is vital that the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* focuses on young people not only as individuals, but also in the context of their families. Families play a central role in the lives of young people. To enhance their children's resilience, families require proper safety nets and supports.⁹ In some instances families may need focused support to provide the best care for their children, particularly those families who are experiencing disadvantage.

VCOSS believes that there is the need for a strong system of family support services that is integrated with the youth services system to ensure that all young people are supported earlier. It is critical that support for families is provided in an integrated way, with seamless provision of supports along the prevention – early intervention – secondary – tertiary service continuum. Sustained investment in a system of universally available family support services that complement and collaborate with a

range of other services, supports and interventions - including youth services, is required.

Family support services provide valuable support to parents, helping to reduce parental stress, improve parenting skills and confidence, and strengthen parent-child relationships. To be most effective, vulnerable families need to be connected to the support services they need as early as possible, and for as long as required.

Organisations providing family support services have reported the increasing pressures their services are under. Organisations' capacity to provide early intervention family support services is limited, because of the significant demands from more complex families who they are required to prioritise because the children are at a higher risk.

Continued under-funding of family support services, particularly early intervention supports, remains one of the key factors undermining improved outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and families.¹⁰ A lack of early intervention family support services damages the development of children and young people.

The current heightened financial hardship being experienced by many families as a result of the drought and increased housing costs, further highlights the urgent need for more early intervention family support services.

An increased investment in early intervention families support services will not only better support families before they reach crisis point but will also result in diverting demand from child protection and other more cost intensive tertiary end services.¹¹

Some families may not require family support services, but they may require additional support and advice. Adolescence is a time of enormous challenges and change for children and their parents¹². Universal parenting supports and information are required, particularly throughout transition periods.

As the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* discussion paper highlighted, 87% of young people see family as being the most important thing in their lives, therefore it is vital that families are supported to develop positive home environments.

A continuum of youth focused services that deliver effective interventions

The *Vulnerable Youth Framework* has the potential to develop and invest in a locally-based, integrated and comprehensive youth service system that is structured along a prevention – early intervention – secondary – tertiary service continuum. VCOSS welcomes the commitment contained in the discussion paper to establish a continuum of youth focussed services that support prevention and early intervention. Establishing this continuum of youth focussed services needs to be accompanied by significant leadership and ongoing investment.

Increased investment in generalist youth support services is one of the key elements to ensure a more timely and integrated approach to supporting and promoting the

health and wellbeing of young people, particularly at the prevention and early identification end of the continuum.

Research conducted by VCOSS and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) which resulted in the report, *Who's carrying the can? A report into youth services gaps in Victoria*, identified the need for generalist youth services across Victoria.¹³ Currently, large gaps exist in the availability of generalist youth services resulting in many young people not being able to access support until they reach crisis point.¹⁴

There needs to be the development of and investment in generalist youth services that goes beyond 'embedding' a youth service system, as suggested in the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* discussion paper.

Investment in prevention, early identification and intervention, as part of a continuum of youth-focused services, can provide young people with crucial supports before they reach crisis point. Generalist youth services, for example, play a pivotal role in reducing the onset of tertiary mental health issues by providing timely support for young people presenting with primary and secondary mental health issues. The Boston Consulting Group report, *Improving Mental Health Outcomes in Victoria*, also noted that services at this level (referred to as Tier one services) can deliver significant economic and social outcomes, and that services at this primary care level are more cost effective.¹⁵

Focus Area Two: Engagement in education, training and employment

Adolescence is a period where the brain goes through key developmental stages, with 17 per cent of brain cell connections being made during this time.¹⁶ This research highlights the importance of young people being able to access supports when they may have issues that could have an impact on this development process. A young person's capacity to participate in education, training and employment is linked to the development of the brain and will have long-term impacts.

VCOSS welcomes the focus of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* on the importance of young people's engagement in education, training and employment. In particular, we welcome the emphasis on the role of schools in the lives of young people.

It is vital that the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* serves as a catalyst for change in the way that schools work with young people, alongside the new *Blueprint*. This change needs to ensure schools are more flexible in the way they work to support the learning and development of vulnerable young people. The proposals put forward in the discussion paper will require a significant culture change within schools – including breaking down the current institutional barriers to enable the move from a silo approach to a more integrated approach to education, learning, development and support for young people.

While VCOSS supports strengthening the involvement and capacity of schools to work with vulnerable young people, it is important to remember that often young people have concerns about the confidentiality of schools and they perceived school as being linked to their parents. This is why a range of services and supports are required to support young people.

Keeping vulnerable young people at school

VCOSS welcomes the emphasis of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* on keeping vulnerable young people engaged in learning and at school. To better support the learning of many vulnerable young people and ensure they remain engaged in education, the development of a more diverse education system is required, rather than the current predominant approach of one-size fits all. More flexible responses are required to better meet the needs of vulnerable young people. This will require the development of alternative curriculum and a re-orientation of what schools view their purpose as – moving a more holistic approach to supporting a young person's learning.

VCOSS has provided examples of three existing responses that are more effectively supporting the learning outcomes of vulnerable children and young people in Appendix One.

Consideration is also required as to how centrally the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development can more effectively support the learning outcomes of vulnerable children and young people. VCOSS believes that a central government policy framework that clearly articulates a broad direction and which enables local flexibility and adaptability is a key enabling factor to achieving improved learning

outcomes for children and young people who experience disadvantage. A central policy framework should provide a broad direction with minimum specifications, and should:

- ❑ clearly establish the direction of change with defined broad outcome goals;
- ❑ establish targets and specify core evaluation requirements based around these broad outcome goals;
- ❑ explicitly allow for innovation and experimentation with cause and effect;
- ❑ set boundaries that cannot be crossed by any implementation strategy;
- ❑ allocate resources, but without specifying how they should be used – resource use to be determined at the local level;
- ❑ incorporate mechanisms to assist in the translation or upscaling of the learnings from innovative practice - both in terms of what worked well and what did not – more broadly across the system.

In developing alternative pathways and curriculum, it is also important to consider the perceptions of these, so that they are regarded as legitimate and valid within schools and the broader community.

Attention particularly needs to be given to enabling the provision of more flexible learning environments in the middle and later years of education for the 10 – 20 per cent of Victorian young people who are disengaged, or at risk of disengaging from the education system. Alternative education programs can provide these young people with literacy and numeracy development; employability skills; life skills; personal development; and, pathways into further education and employment.¹⁷

Participation in VCAL and VET can also be linked to increased participation in higher education. For students who are at-risk of becoming disengaged from the education system school, VCAL and VET play a crucial role in retaining them within the education system through the provision of a broader curriculum and more flexible and adaptive learning environment. It is vital however that both VET in Schools and Community VCAL be adequately funded.

While there are VCE, VET and VCAL opportunities at mainstream schools, there also needs to be increased attention in the later years of education to provide more flexible learning environments for young people who are disengaged or at-risk of disengaging from the education system. Opportunities are generally limited for marginalised and vulnerable young people to re-engage in education given the issues that they face and their need for high level intensive educational and social support. This is why it is vital that additional mechanisms to support young people aged 18-25 are provided within the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*.

VCOSS believes that to better support the learning outcomes of children and young people who experience disadvantage, it is critical to surround both them and their family with key social supports. Vulnerable young people, such as those with mental health issues, who have become a young parent, who experience family violence or who are in state care, require intensive social and educational supports to enable them to continue their learning. For example, young people in residential care often experience upheaval in the final years of schools, with a high percentage changing schools and an increased rate of absenteeism¹⁸, impacting on their failure to engage with higher education.¹⁹

Both Berry Street Victoria and MacKillop Family Services operate independent schools to support young people in out-of-home care who have had difficulty engaging in mainstream education. It is important that Government continue to work with both families and local communities to develop and support small community-based educational settings, either within or outside mainstream schools, for young people at-risk of disengaging or already disengaged from education.

VCOSS believes that there need to be mechanisms to ensure that schools better meet the needs of vulnerable young people. Funding for schools needs to be linked to outcomes and school retention, rather than simply who is enrolled on census date. This funding mechanism should particularly focus on identified key groups and key outcomes. Schools also require additional resources to enable them to better support vulnerable young people. This could be through brokerage money so that schools can bring in community supports and by increasing school global budgets to encompass alternative pathways and supports for vulnerable young people. Another key step is to improve and strengthen the partnerships and collaborative relationships between schools and local community sector organisations – this is discussed in greater detail in the ‘Greater coordination and broader service system’ section.

Early identification and early intervention

VCOSS welcomes the commitment to strengthening the role of school health and welfare staff in improving the identification of vulnerable young people. Alongside this, VCOSS expects that the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* will be informed by the current review being undertaken of the Student Support Services Officers role and system.

Given that secondary schools have been identified as being well positioned to identify vulnerable young people and work with local services, it is essential that schools have dedicated staff working in community development and outreach roles with both young people and youth services. In addition, if schools are to ensure that appropriate supports are put in place for young people, particularly within the wider health and community services system, these services need to be accessible and available. Currently there are long waiting lists in specialist services, and in some communities, there are no services to refer to. This is one of the key reasons why investment in the service system is urgently required.

Individualised plans for more vulnerable students

Currently there is limited accountability in relation to individual student’s learning outcomes, particularly those of vulnerable young people. VCOSS supports the introduction of individualised plans for vulnerable students that are developed in collaboration with schools and other agencies.

The recently released *Wannik: Learning Together* strategy to improve the educational outcomes for Indigenous students highlights the importance of individual learning plans for Indigenous students, as does the Program for Students with a Disability. Children and young people in out-of-home care are also required to have individual education plans. Currently plans are developed in some cases and simply put in a filing cabinet never to be referred to again. It is important that if individual education plans are to be introduced for vulnerable young people that they are

meaningfully referred to and become a constantly evolving document. VCOSS believes that it would be valuable for the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* to include the introduction of individual plans, however they must be linked to accountability for schools.

Individualised plans will also require a certain level of resourcing, particularly as they are taking a multi-agency planning approach.

Greater coordination with the broader services system

VCOSS supports improved coordination between schools and the broader service system. This, however, should not simply be about supporting entry into further education, training or employment. It should be about supporting the whole young person to achieve their full potential across their life.

Significant systems change across all the systems and structures that support and promote the wellbeing, learning, health and development of young people is required. There is clear evidence that a young person's learning does not occur in isolation from the other parts of their life. However the traditional school structure, model and approach responds as if this is the case. The collective challenge that the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* needs to respond to is to identify and develop collaborative networks between schools and other sectors to improve the learning outcomes for students, particularly those who experience disadvantage.

VCOSS believes that the development of cross-sector, collaborative networks are a key way to overcome disadvantage. This is particularly so in the area of education: there are significant opportunities to improve learning outcomes through addressing the social factors that negatively impact on a young person's ability to learn. The quality of the child's environment as a whole is important to educational success and improved social outcomes.

Schools are the ideal entry point for the provision of additional support and enabling linkages, as for many families, schools are the only formal institutions that they engage with. However schools are naturally focused primarily on the educational needs of young people. To address the social needs of young people, it is critical that schools are networked and integrated with a range of other community services and structures. Such new approaches are required to enable the improved integration of education and broader community organisations and structures.

The *Vulnerable Youth Framework* needs to drive the development of a more collaborative-based system that actively supports the learning outcomes of all students, particularly those who experience disadvantage. The development of collaborative networks that are focused on supporting and enabling the learning outcomes of all students, particularly those who experience disadvantage, requires two key steps. Firstly, it is vital to draw together the full range of resources that affect the learning and development of children. Such a step is critical as the evidence highlights that the quality of a young person's environment as a whole – at home, in care, at school, in the community – is central to supporting their learning and development. The second step is ensuring the management of school resources and learning models are more flexible and include the capacity to be locally-driven so as to more effectively respond to the diversity of need.

As part of driving the development of more collaborative networks, the *Blueprint* needs to ensure the development of new ways of working that give privilege to innovation. Such steps require all stakeholders, including government, accepting that everything tried will not be successful, and that – importantly – there will be learnings to be gained from these as well as the successful initiatives. To enable this, mechanisms need to be established that enable case studies of what works and what hasn't been effective to be shared across the community, education and government sectors.

Improved coordination needs to be adequately resourced and build on existing networks, such as the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs), who already have a valuable insight and commitment to supporting young people's entry into further education, training or employment.

Focus Area Three: Local planning for youth services

The youth service system in Victoria is currently fragmented and is not informed by adequate planning mechanisms. Planning for adequate supports and services along the service continuum for young people is essential.

VCOSS welcomes the emphasis on the development of planning mechanisms for youth services. Local planning has the potential to improve service responses, enhance community capacity and deliver improved outcomes for young people. Local plans also have the capacity to improve collaboration, any collaborations need to be adequately resourced and build on existing networks.

It is essential that planning undertaken at a local level is used to inform policy development at a state-wide level. This was reinforced by the recommendation of the KPMG report, *Improving youth service responses in Victoria*, which suggested the development of a State-wide Strategic Framework for Youth Services.

Local planning and coordination

VCOSS welcomes the introduction of local-level youth plans, however is concerned that the discussion paper does not provide sufficient detail about their development, implementation or resourcing.

As well as local level planning informing policy development at the state-wide level, it is also critical that the State Government provides leadership to guide the development of local-level youth plans, with clear central guidelines that can inform the development of locally driven plans. Resources also need to be allocated not only for the development of the plan but also to meet the needs of vulnerable young people when service gaps are identified in the planning process. A central, state-wide policy framework could provide a broad direction with minimum specifications, and should:

- ❑ clearly establish the direction of change with defined broad outcome goals;
- ❑ establish targets and specify core evaluation requirements based around these broad outcome goals;
- ❑ explicitly allow for innovation and experimentation with cause and effect;
- ❑ set boundaries that cannot be crossed by any implementation strategy;
- ❑ allocate resources, but without specifying how they should be used – resource use to be determined at the local level;
- ❑ incorporate mechanisms to assist in the translation or upscaling of the learnings from innovative practice - both in terms of what worked well and what did not – more broadly across the system.

One of the central questions to be addressed is who is to be responsible for the development of the local area plans? VCOSS believes that this may vary from community to community – in some areas the local government may be best placed, or in others a community sector organisation, while an independent consultant may be more appropriate for other communities. It is vital that local area youth plans are developed in a collaborative way that encompasses the needs of young people within that locality.

Municipal Early Years Plans (MEYPs) provide an example of local area planning. While some MEYPs have led to the development of a living document that were developed collaboratively and are adequately resourced, other MEYPs were developed by a consultant who had no contact with the local community and remain on a shelf or on a website, not actively used in any way. When done well MEYPs have led to the development of thorough plans that are informed by ongoing consultative mechanisms with children, families, communities and service providers. By identifying the needs of the community and service gaps MEYPs have led to additional investment and service development. It is vital that the learning's from MEYPs are drawn on in the development of the Vulnerable Youth Framework and the introduction of local-level youth plans. If local-level plans are introduced as part of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*, it is vital that there is a level of accountability, that the Government monitors their development and implementation, and that they are linked to and informed by a state-wide framework.

Resources also need to be allocated for the participation of local and state-wide organisations in the planning process. Given that there may be 75 plans, state-wide agencies and peak bodies, may be constantly called upon to provide feedback and input into the development of plans. VCOSS believes that it is vital that they are resourced for this role.

It is also important that local-level youth plans also reflect and integrate existing plans and planning mechanisms. Examples of this are the catchment-based family services alliance plans that were developed as part of the *Strategic Framework for Family Services*.

Improved collaboration

VCOSS welcomes the desire to improve cooperation and collaboration between levels of government and community sector organisations. It is vital that this process build on existing networks and collaborations and that organisations are adequately resourced to participate. It appears that there is an assumption behalf of Government that the development and maintenance of networks are cost neutral.

Currently, community sector organisations participate in a range of networks and partnerships, many of which involve the same stakeholders. Connections – Child, Youth and Family Services, a large multi-service community sector organisation operating in the outer-south of Melbourne, is involved in a range of networks and alliances. Here is an example of what they are involved in:

- ❑ Family Services Alliance;
- ❑ South East Regional Youth Advisory Network;
- ❑ Cardinia Shire Youth network;
- ❑ Casey Youth network;
- ❑ City of Greater Dandenong Youth network;
- ❑ Casey Best Start program;
- ❑ Cardinia Best Start program;
- ❑ Multi-cultural youth network;
- ❑ Working together strategy;
- ❑ City of Greater Dandenong Early Years forum;
- ❑ Dandenong Aboriginal Cooperative Best Start program;

- ❑ Communities for Children – Dandenong;
- ❑ Communities for Children – Casey;
- ❑ Hampton Park Community Renewal Project;
- ❑ Strengthening Communities Cranbourne East Project;
- ❑ South East Primary Care Partnership;
- ❑ DHS Family Services Strategic Planning Group; and
- ❑ DHS Family and Out of Home Care Strategic Planning Group.

Funding for community sector organisations currently funds service delivery. It is essential that community sector organisations are resourced to participate in this broader collaborative work as it requires considerable resource allocation and staff time. VCOSS supports the adoption of a model that is similar to that used in the Primary Care Partnerships, where funding is included for networking and linking.

Improved understanding and greater emphasis on outcomes

VCOSS welcomes the focus of the *Framework* on improving the outcomes of all young people. VCOSS believes that it is vital that the *Framework* be based on *The Victorian Child and Adolescent Outcomes Framework*, and that these outcomes are used to monitor the impact and effectiveness of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* and also the local-level youth plans. Local-level youth plans need to be based on consistent State-wide outcomes, as well as local outcomes and indicators.

Participation of vulnerable young people

VCOSS believes that it is vital that vulnerable young people are encouraged to actively participate in local networks and in the development of local-level youth plans. It is important that processes for including vulnerable young people are adequately resourced and implemented in a respectful way. Advice on consulting with young people should be sought from organisations with expertise and understanding, such as YACVic, who have developed the *Taking Young People Seriously* handbooks which detail strategies for youth participation.

There is also a need for consistent resources to support and enable the participation of vulnerable young people in planning and networks. It is important to remember that it is a big step for a young person to go from engaging in a service to engaging in a local area plan. VCOSS members have highlighted the importance of engaging with young people in a program setting, rather than in a large group, and that there are models of engaging with young people that do work, such as those that are peer-led. It is important the knowledge of the sector is drawn upon in relation to facilitating the meaningful participation of youth people in service planning, delivery and networks.

Focus Area Four: Tailored responses to particular groups

*'While the majority of young Victorians are faring well, for a minority this is not the case and there are clear inequalities in outcomes for some young people.'*²⁰

It is important that all young Victorians are provided with the services and supports that will enable them to achieve their full potential. In particular there need to be targeted responses to address the particular issues facing vulnerable young people.

Needs identification through local planning

VCOSS supports the action to identify the needs of particular groups of young people as relevant to local areas.

It is vital that these groups of young people and the organisations that represent and work alongside them are adequately resourced to participate. For example, the discussion paper highlights that peak bodies representing young people with a disability need to be included in developing local-area plans. Some peak bodies are often comprised of minimal and part-time staffing levels, meaning that their capacity is limited, particularly if they are having to be involved in the developed of 75 local-level plans.

Local responses are not the only responses that are required to adequately support particular groups of vulnerable young people. There needs to also be State-wide responses that will ensure that the needs of these particularly vulnerable young people are met in a cohesive and accountable way.

Other groups of vulnerable young people

VCOSS welcomes the emphasis on these particular groups of young people in the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* discussion paper, and anticipates that the *Framework* will include a range of responses that are tailored so that they are relevant and appropriate to each.

VCOSS believes that strategies need to focus particularly on:

- homeless young people,²¹
- young people in and leaving State care,
- same-sex attracted young people,
- Indigenous young people,
- young people in contact with the youth justice system,
- young people with a disability,
- young people experiencing mental health issues,
- young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage,
- young people living in geographically isolated areas; and
- young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

VCOSS is particularly concerned about the absence of young people in and leaving out-of-home care as a particular group requiring attention. This group of young people are a high risk group on the layers of vulnerability detailed in the *Framework*. The *State of Victoria's Young People* identifies this group as being particularly at-risk – consistency across Victorian Government policy and action is required to best support vulnerable young people.

VCOSS would believes the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* needs to be expanded to include additional responses to other particular groups of vulnerable young people.

Focus Area Five: Effective services, capable people

At times the discussion paper refers to the youth services system, while at other times it details that it does not exist. VCOSS believes there needs to be a comprehensive investment in the development of a youth services system.

Services that work

Investment in locally based youth services is required in order for there to be effective services and capable people to support vulnerable young people. There needs to be the development of and investment in generalist youth services that goes beyond 'embedding' a youth service system, as suggested in this action for change. VCOSS is concerned that by using the term 'embedding' there will be no investment in the development of new services or in enhancing existing services – this is urgently required if we are to better support and promote the wellbeing of vulnerable young people.

Investment in prevention, early identification and intervention, as part of a continuum of youth-focused services, will provide young people with crucial supports before they reach crisis point.

Workforce development

VCOSS supports the view of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* that vulnerable young people will benefit from a professionally trained work force that delivers high quality services.

VCOSS recognises that there is an important role for well-trained volunteers and mentors who have expertise in working with young people. However, it is critical that there is recognition that mentors and volunteers cannot replace a qualified and well-trained work force.

Youth workers have a set of professional skills and expertise and urgent investment is required to ensure the professionalization of this workforce. VCOSS calls on Government to invest in the further development of the *Code of Ethical Practice - A First Step for the Victorian Youth Sector* that was developed by YACVic.

There is also the need for work to be done to ensure that there are adequate industrial conditions for youth workers. This will go part of the way in ensuring the recruitment and retention of professionals into the sector. Workforce development is equally essential.

A quality and highly skilled community services workforce is essential to support the wellbeing of Victorians and contribute to an inclusive society. It is important that any workforce development strategies that are undertaken as part of the Vulnerable Youth Framework be linked in with existing work that is currently being undertaken by the Office for the Community Sector. This will ensure that a coherent Framework is developed across the community sector.

Building an evidence base to support best practice

VCOSS supports the development of an evidence base to inform best practice, and believes that it is essential that funding is allocated for research and evaluation. This

will enable both Government and the youth and community service sector to build on existing knowledge and develop services that can better respond to the needs of vulnerable young people.

VCOSS is unsure how a quality assurance system could be implemented, given that services to young people are funded from a range of sources, including all levels of Government, the community sector and philanthropic organisations. Many of these organisations currently participate in a range of existing quality assurances systems. If the fragmented nature of youth services funding is addressed through the *Framework*, then there may be a greater opportunity to implement a quality assurance process.

Working with highly vulnerable young people

VCOSS believes that vulnerable young people require a range of coordinated services and supports. VCOSS welcomes the proactive responses to young people that are being considered. Interventions for young people with highly complex needs need to not only be coordinated and comprehensive, they also need to be adequately resourced to ensure that organisations can work collaboratively to best meet the needs of the young person that they are working with.

Appendix One

EXAMPLES

1. *Deemed enrolment model*

As recognised in the Blueprint, the development of collaborative networks that are focused on supporting and enabling the learning outcomes of all students, particularly those who experience disadvantage, is central to achieving improved learning outcomes. Ensuring the management of school resources and learning models are more flexible and include the capacity to be locally-driven so as to more effectively respond to the diversity of need is a significant part of achieving this.

An example of this is that of the deemed enrolment model developed in partnership by St Luke's Anglicare, the regional office of the then Department of Education and Training and the four local secondary colleges in Bendigo, which focuses on supporting young people aged 12-15 who are at risk of or who have disengaged from the education system. The objective is to provide a bridge for young people to support them in reengaging with school or other mainstream educational and vocational based programs. This is achieved through a number of steps including the development of an education plan, formation of a support team and the availability of the funding generated from the young person's enrolment to develop a range of educational programs to meet the young person's needs. An detailed evaluation of the model is currently being undertaken.

The key role centrally for this type of model is to give permission to enable such approaches.

2. *NetSchool*

The Blueprint also recognises the need to provide improved responses to better support the learning of all young people, including the 10 - 20 per cent of Victorian young people who are disengaged, or at risk of disengaging from the education system. VCOSS believes that a focused effort is required to both improve the mainstream education system, and to resource alternative learning environments.

NETSchool in Bendigo is one effective model that is supporting the ongoing engagement of vulnerable young people in learning. NETschool is a small, separate campus of Bendigo Senior Secondary College, and is a key part of the broader Bendigo Education Plan.

NETSchool provides vulnerable young people aged 16 to 21 with access to continuing their learning through the development of centre-based and home-based learning. Their model is a unique one that allows young people who have been outside of the education system for extended periods to complete VCAL, VET and VCE. NetSchool has developed considerable expertise in supporting young people aged 15 to 19 years to re-engage in education through partnerships with community sector organisations such as St Luke's Anglicare and Bendigo Community Health Service.

NETschool has successfully reengaged more than 160 young people over the past 3 years who had considered that participating in post-compulsory secondary schooling was beyond their grasp.

One of VCOSS members, St Luke's Anglicare in Bendigo has highlighted to us the value of NETSchool from their perspective. David Pugh, St Luke's Anglicare Chief Executive Officer, has noted that a common theme that emerges from their work in providing a range of services to vulnerable young people is that many of them wish to re-engage in education but the opportunities are limited given the issues they face and the need for a high level of educational support. The NETSchool model addresses the needs of these young people, enabling them to continue their learning. VCOSS believes that models such as NETSchool are clearly required to better support the learning of vulnerable young people. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you ongoing funding for NETSchool.

3. *Braybrook Maidstone Youth Partnership (BMYP)*

The Braybrook Maidstone Youth Partnership (BMYP) is a collaboration between state and local government and the not-for-profit sector. The charter of the BMYP is to:

- put in place structures that enable better coordination of services for young people experiencing disadvantage in Braybrook and Maidstone; and
- collectively undertake long-term service planning.

The emphasis of the BMYP is on:

- investing in cross-agency, cross-government and cross-sectoral service responses for young people;
- leading integrated service delivery and program planning that will achieve clearly-identified health, education, training and employment outcomes for young people in Braybrook and Maidstone, and
- sustainability – including a long-term commitment to local coordination and planning.

Such an approach has already resulted in key outcomes including:

- development and adoption of the Braybrook Maidston Youth Partnership Outcomes Framework which incorporates an agreement from all the partners to work to one local area plan that achieves long term sustainable outcomes for young people in the area;
- establishment of the Braybrook Youth Enterprise Hub which provides education, training and employment support programs that link young people back to school, or to TAFE or to employment; and
- development of a pre-employment/life skills initiative (in line with the BMYP integrated youth plan) by Victoria University (a member of the BMYP), via the Youth Guarantee funding that provides young people with a pathway from school to further training within VUT/TAFE, as well to traineeships provided by the State Government's Youth Employment scheme

Further information

For further information regarding this submission, please contact:

- Carolyn Atkins, Deputy Director,
E: carolyn.atkins@vcoss.org.au or
- Lauren Matthews, Policy Analyst
E: lauren.matthews@vcoss.org.au.

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