

VCOSS

Rural and Regional

Statement 2010 -11

'It is simply not acceptable that we should snap back to where we were before – when we know that the pre-recession economy was neither sustainable, nor just.'

Julia Unwin, CEO, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

As the impacts of the Global Financial Crisis and the 2009 Victorian bushfires recede, serious challenges remain, including a changing climate and rapid population growth.

The overriding need to prioritise social equity and social cohesion, particularly by strengthening opportunities for workforce and education participation, is the key theme underlying the analysis and recommendations of this Budget submission.

In order to build a socially sustainable state, rural and regional Victorians must have fair access to opportunities, services and resources. *VCOSS Rural and Regional Statement* highlights our *State Budget Submission 2010-11* recommendations for spending priorities in rural and regional areas.

Children, young people and families

VCOSS calls on the Government to strengthen the family services sector and ensure vulnerable families are connected to services as early as possible, for as long as required. Additional investment is called for to ensure organisations provide culturally competent services to Aboriginal Victorians.

Young people living in rural and regional Victoria often have no access to youth services or to education or work opportunities.¹ Their disadvantage is compounded by the impact of drought, high levels of tertiary deferral, poor access to public transport and large gaps in service availability.²

1. VCOSS proposes that the Victorian Government better support vulnerable young Victorians by funding a rural youth sector project, with a specific policy, advocacy and sector development focus on rural and regional young people.

Currently, same-sex attracted and transgender young people report high levels of discrimination and abuse based on their sexuality.³ VCOSS calls for the Government to strengthen the program of same sex-attracted and transgender youth support services.

Climate change, energy and water

Victoria is on the front-line of climate change, facing a future with water scarcity, longer and more severe droughts, heatwaves and greater risks of bushfire and floods. The impacts and the costs are already, and will continue to be, unevenly distributed across Victoria. Low income earners and disadvantaged communities are likely to be affected first and worst.

A number of Victorian communities are facing significant additional impacts from climate change, including those affected by drought, water scarcity, industry change and greater risk of flood and fires.

2. VCOSS proposes that the Victorian Government support capacity and resilience in communities experiencing ongoing stress from drought and climate change by:
 - a. Refunding drought support positions and flexible local drought support funds, and
 - b. Supporting inclusive and equitable transition planning for communities facing significant impacts from climate change and related structural adjustment.

Many rural water businesses have increased water prices at rates higher than metropolitan prices. Households reliant on carted water in the drought face even higher charges.

3. VCOSS proposes that the Victorian Government ensure all households can maintain access to an adequate supply of essential water by:
 - a. Removing the volumetric cap on the current 50 per cent water concession,
 - b. Extending the *Water Wise* program to all households who have previously received the carted water rebate, and
 - c. Better promoting the carted water rebate to ensure all low income households without reticulated water are able to access relevant concessions and rebates.

The impacts of the 2009 Victorian bushfires clearly demonstrated the need for improved planning, coordination, partnership and communication at the local level and across Government, for all types of emergencies

4. VCOSS proposes that the Victorian Government provide full-time emergency planning and recovery managers within local government.

Community sector sustainability

Community sector organisations (CSOs) are at the forefront of providing support for vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians and play a critical role in strengthening community resilience, particularly in times of adversity. VCOSS calls on the Government to strengthen the community sector by fully funding services, including the full cost of outreach, providing longer term funding to assist communities recover from emergencies and investing in the community sector workforce.

Education and early childhood development

In Victoria, educational outcomes remain closely linked to parental income.⁴ This indicates that our education system is reinforcing, rather than addressing disadvantage. Reversing this trend is at the centre of the challenge to improve equity in our community. VCOSS calls on the Government to strengthen its investments in education by providing more flexible education programs for vulnerable young people, addressing cost barriers to education, and ensuring universal access to four-year-old kindergarten programs.

Health and wellbeing

While Victorians generally have better health than other Australians, this masks significant health inequalities with rural and regional residents having generally poorer health than Melbournians. VCOSS calls on the Government to invest in health equity, in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services, in community health services and in mental health.

Housing

A lack of affordable rental housing has meant Victorian rents have increased 5.7 per cent in the year to June 2009, and 41 per cent over the last five years.⁵ The shortage of affordable housing in the private rental market is compounded by a decline in social housing as a proportion of all housing stock, despite record levels of investment.⁶ VCOSS calls on the Government to develop a target for social housing at 5 per cent of all housing stock accompanied by an integrated housing plan to achieve this target.

Human rights

The protection and promotion of human rights is fundamental to achieving a fairer Victoria, and is one of the three main drivers of 'liveability'.⁷ VCOSS calls on the Government to establish an independent Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner and have a comprehensive review of the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006*.

Transport

Transport plays a critical role in linking cities and regions to support economic development across Victoria. It is also the means by which individuals can access employment, education, community life and services.

The Victorian Transport Plan included welcome increases in public transport services in rural and regional areas. However public transport links from small towns to regional cities continue to be scarce, compromising many residents' ability to participate economically.

Whilst there are major gaps in mainstream rural and regional services, the regional school bus network provides a comprehensive network linking small towns with regional cities (see **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**)

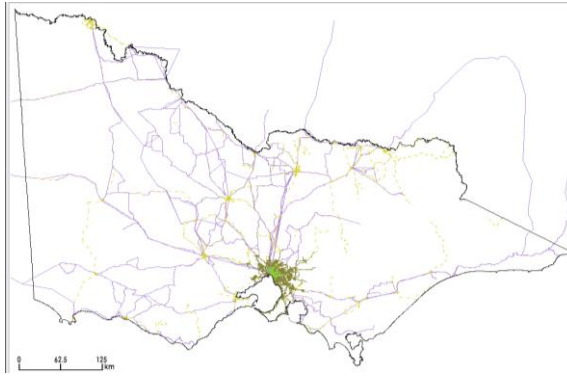


Figure 1. Route bus, V/line coach & regional bus services

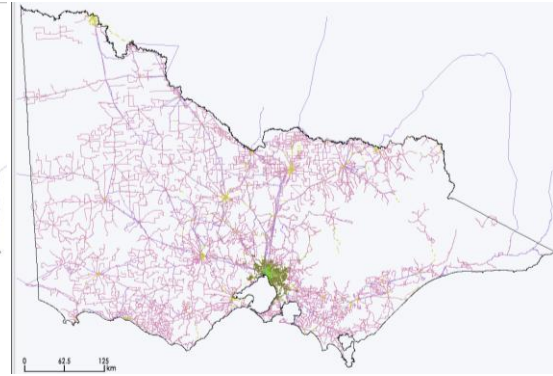


Figure 2. Route bus, V/line coach, regional services & school bus services

This is one area where the Victorian Government could achieve a massive leap in service provision, with minimal extra investment. The current exclusion of non-school passengers from school buses is both a lost opportunity and a waste of resources. Many residents of small rural towns could use these bus services to access job opportunities or vital community services available in regional centres.

With minimal extra investment, integration of mainstream and school bus services could deliver a quantum leap in service access and participation for rural Victorians.

5. VCOSS proposes that the Victorian Government build an integrated rural transport network for all users, including school bus services. A minimal extra investment would be necessary to extend existing school bus routes and enhance the carrying capacity and accessibility of some services.

For young people who need to travel regularly to access Centrelink, training programs, job interviews and casual employment or shift work, lack of affordable transport can compromise their connection to job opportunities.

6. VCOSS proposes that the Victorian Government subsidise transport for young people accessing job interviews and employment training programs.

References

¹ YACVic, *Youth Affairs Council of Victoria's Priorities for the 2009-10 State Budget*, YACVic, January 2009.

² YACVic (2009) ...

³ DEECD & the DPCD, *The State of Victoria's Young People*, Victorian Government, 2008.

⁴ R Teese & J Polesal, *Undemocratic Schooling: Equity and Quality in Mass Secondary Education in Australia*, Melbourne University Publishing, Melbourne, 2003.

⁵ DHS, *Rental Report: March quarter 2009*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, August 2009, p 8.

⁶ National Housing Supply Council, *State of Supply Report 2008*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2009, p 98.

⁷ Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, *A State of Liveability: An Inquiry into Enhancing Victoria's Liveability*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, October 2008.