

Friday 22 August 2008

The Executive Officer
Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee
Parliament of Victoria
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Madam/Sir

Submission to Inquiry into Improving Access to Victorian Public Sector Information and Data

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) has served Victorians as the peak independent coordinating body of the social and community services sector for over 60 years. VCOSS raises awareness of the existence, causes and effects of poverty and inequality and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society. As well as promoting the wellbeing of those experiencing disadvantage and contributing to initiatives seeking to create a more just society, VCOSS also provides a strong, non-political voice for the community sector.

VCOSS works together with its members on issues of poverty and inequality and seeks to ensure that community resources and services are accessible and affordable. VCOSS promotes community participation and strengthening the value of citizenship in our community. VCOSS advocates on behalf of disadvantaged Victorians through:

- policy development and analysis;
- direct advocacy to government;
- evidence based research;
- reports, media releases and submissions;
- an annual State Budget submission; and
- strengthening the community sector with collaborative initiatives and by providing a range of services to member organisations.

VCOSS endorses and supports the submission made by the Public Interest Law Clearing House (Vic) Inc. (PILCH) to this Inquiry. We also wish to make the following additional points.

Types of information to improve community and civic engagement

The community services sector includes a number of organisations, such as peak and social policy organisations, that play a key role in the development of public policy. These organisations represent the interests of individuals and households,

especially disadvantaged and vulnerable ones, during the policy making process. Their capacity to fulfil this vital role was significantly enhanced when the Australian Bureau of Statistics changed its pricing policy and made the majority of its statistical information available for no cost from its website. Having access to comprehensive current data enabled these organisations to give more informed advice and make stronger connections between social policy and life outcomes, thus strengthening the public policy-making process. Improving access to research undertaken or funded by the Victorian Government will further enhance the process.

Recommendation: That access to research undertaken or funded by the Victorian Government be increased in order to improve and develop community and civic engagement by facilitating greater access to information relevant to public policy for community services organisations (CSOs) engaging in the policy-making process.

Pricing options for public sector information (PSI)

Research and statistics

The discussion paper presents considerable evidence asserting the economic value of giving access to PSI at no or marginal cost. Additionally, VCOSS is cognisant of the social value — in particular, through facilitating access to research and statistics by peak and social policy organisations active in the public policy development process (as discussed above). Most of these organisations have very limited access to information sold at commercial rates due to extremely limited financial resources.

Recommendation: That research undertaken or funded by the Victorian Government be made available at no or marginal cost in order to improve and develop community and civic engagement by facilitating greater access to information relevant to public policy for the community services sector.

Freedom of Information applications

Many CSOs need to make use of Freedom of Information provisions to access information necessary for their work. This includes peak and social policy organisations seeking data and information not otherwise available to inform their policy work, and direct service organisations seeking personal information on behalf of individual clients. In both situations, the use of the information contributes to the public good: strengthening the public policy-making process, and facilitating better outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals and households, respectively. The fee for making an FoI application may be relatively low, but the fees for searching for and copying documents can be considerably higher. The aggregate impact on organisations that are already operating with small or no financial margins is significant enough to constitute a barrier to access.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government abolish FoI application, searching and copying fees.

Other issues

Data interoperability

CSOs are a source of much PSI. Service delivery data reported to program funders and government departments provides a statewide picture of community needs and the response to those needs in addition to its accountability function. However the broader usefulness of much of this data is limited by inconsistencies in data schemas

and the absence of interoperability standards.¹ Developing consistent data dictionaries and a uniform interoperability standard would enable this rich data to be used more effectively to guide public policy development. It would also enable NFPs to reuse data collected for their program funders for their own organisational planning and development, improving service delivery to vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government, in consultation with the community services sector, develop and publish sector-specific data dictionaries, a common dataset, and a uniform interoperability standard for data collected from the sector.

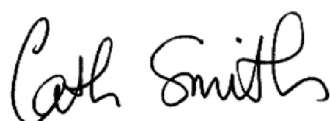
Making data fully accessible

When considering improving access to information, it must be remembered that making information physically accessible is not enough. For the seventeen per cent of Australians with a print disability (including vision impairment, learning disabilities, cognitive impairment, lack of functional literacy and limited English language ability),² being able to download information from the web is only half the battle. The Government should investigate existing standards for electronic document accessibility and ensure that PSI is compliant with the relevant standard(s) wherever possible.

Recommendation: That wherever possible, publically accessible PSI is compliant with relevant accessibility standards to ensure equity in access.

VCOSS appreciates the opportunity to participate in this Inquiry. If you wish to discuss matters raised in this submission further, please contact Dean Lombard, ICT Projects Coordinator, at dean.lombard@vcoss.org.au or on (03) 9654 5050.

Yours sincerely



Cath Smith
Chief Executive Officer

¹ R Vines *Towards a Futures Strategy for the Community Sector: A Knowledge Perspective*, paper presented at VCOSS Congress 1-2 August 2007

² T Cooney *Including All Consumers – communicating and transacting with people with a print disability*, Financial Literacy, Banking and Identity Conference, RMIT University, 25-26 October 2006