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# 2011-2012 VICTORIAN STATE BUDGET SUBMISSION

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NEW DIRECTIONS FOR SMART GOVERNMENT:  
ACHIEVING A STRONGER, FAIRER VICTORIA

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## NOTES

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This submission has been prepared by the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), the peak organisation of the Victorian social and community services sector. VCOSS raises awareness of the causes and effects of poverty and inequality and advocates for a fair and equitable society.

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“The Coalition Government has an extraordinary opportunity now, as a first term Government with a strong economic base, to really make a difference – to find new solutions to old problems, to tap into new thinking and research, and to look – as VCOSS’ state election platform urged all parties – at the causes, not the consequences of issues so we can really have the biggest impact in building a stronger, fairer Victoria.”

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## OVERVIEW

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### **The relative strength of the Victorian economy and our growing population points to an exciting future for most Victorians.**

This also provides a strong platform for innovation to address the challenges that will affect Victoria's future and the wellbeing of all Victorians.

Many of these challenges were highlighted in the recent state election campaign and result – not least the critical lack of quality services and cost of living pressures being experienced in Melbourne's suburbs and in rural and regional Victoria.

It is time to act for these parts of metropolitan Melbourne and rural and regional Victoria, and to strengthen the opportunities offered to other vulnerable people within the community who are struggling because they don't get the right support in the right place at the right time. Victorians also face the challenge of responding to the demands of a changing climate – we know only too well the impacts on our communities of the increasing frequency and severity of heatwaves, fires and floods, as well as the lasting impact of drought and dryness.

The Coalition Government has an extraordinary opportunity now, as a first term Government with a strong economic base, to really make a difference – to find new solutions to old problems, to tap into new thinking and research, and to look – as VCOSS' state election platform urged all parties – at the causes, not the consequences of issues so we can really have the biggest impact in building a stronger, fairer Victoria.

Many in the Victorian community sector recall a grim period in the 1990s when the then Coalition Government cut services and programs that were delivering

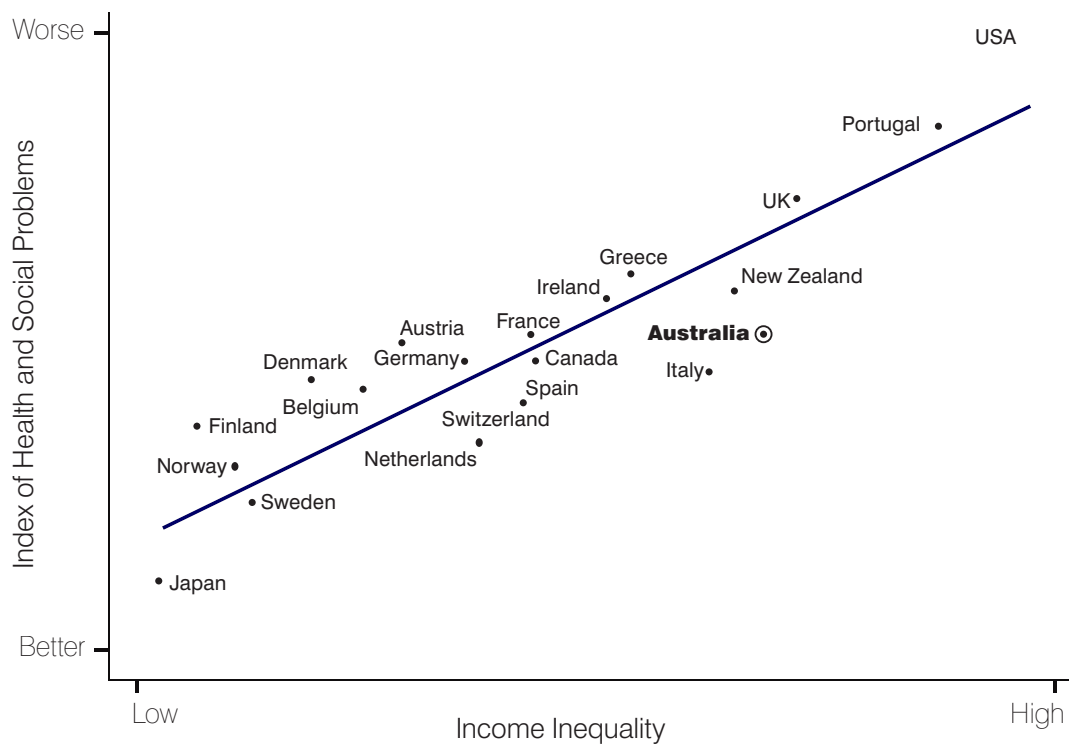
important supports to many. VCOSS has welcomed the Coalition's reassurances that these are different times, and believes that this is reinforced in key commitments of the new Government to improving supports for vulnerable Victorians and communities. The Coalition's support for pay equity in the Victorian community sector – by far the best response of any state or territory Government in Australia to date – is also a very welcome recognition of the important role of community services in Victoria.

The following pages of this submission provide more detail on the Coalition policy initiatives that VCOSS believes need to be prioritised in the 2011-12 State Budget, and ways that their impact can be strengthened.

VCOSS looks forward to working with the Coalition Government on all these important issues to support better outcomes for all Victorians and Victoria's prosperity.

## International impacts of income inequality

Research by UK Professor of Medical Epidemiology Richard Wilkinson shows that Australia is more unequal than most other OECD nations and that it is inequality – not wealth overall – that drives poor social outcomes across the whole community.



Source | R Wilkinson & K Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*, London, Penguin Books, 2009.

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# CHILDREN & FAMILIES

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## THE ISSUES

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**Stopping abuse of children before it happens is one of the most important challenges to be met by the new Government and the Victorian community. Providing parents with the supports they need to do the best job they can, even in difficult circumstances, has proven the most effective way of protecting children.**

The challenge is finding a balance between supporting the tertiary child protection system and the need for investment in integrated and early intervention family services. This means looking beyond tertiary child protection services that are required to respond to children and families at immediate risk, and examining why families are in crisis in the first place.

Families struggle for all sorts of reasons – poverty, mental and physical health issues, drug and alcohol problems, unemployment, and family violence, among other issues. Providing parents or other carers with the supports they need to do the best possible job, even in difficult circumstances, is the most effective way of protecting children. But it requires strong investment and an integrated response.

Over the past decade, successful initiatives in support for families and children have been trialled and robust models for service delivery created in Victoria. However the lack of investment by successive governments means that many families are only getting support once they reach crisis – families needing counselling or parenting help are put on waiting lists, often for months, resulting in problems escalating and leading to child protection interventions.

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## THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

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The Coalition has made some strategic commitments in the area of children and families that recognise these challenges. These include committing to:

- better supporting vulnerable families through a focus on ante and post-natal support,
- a parenting strategy to assist parents to deal with children's specific behavioural and developmental challenges, and
- the re-focusing of adult services, such as drug and alcohol, housing support, family violence and mental health services, to be able to better meet the needs of children.

The community sector looks forward to working with the Government to build a stronger and more integrated service response that better meets the needs of all Victorian children and families, including specific supports for Aboriginal children and families.

VCOSS also welcomes the Coalition's recognition of the particular vulnerability of young people leaving out-of-home care, and the commitments to health and education assessments and enhanced leaving care supports. As in all areas of acute need, critical extra resources need to be supported by strong links between the education, health and human services that deliver them.

We also very much welcome the Coalition's commitment to an independent Children's Commissioner which, to fulfil its mandate, will need additional resources as well as independence.

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## STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

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Like many areas of service delivery in Victoria, supports for families and children have not kept up with population growth on the urban fringe and in fast growing regional cities. The result is pressured services which have to close their waiting lists and deny families access to critical early intervention.

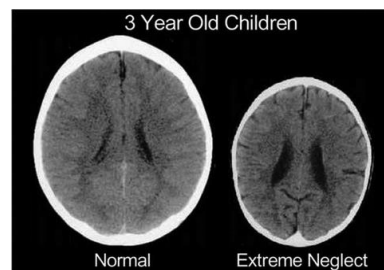
The development of a population-based funding framework for family services will turn this dangerous trend around and avoid entrenching disadvantage in new communities.

## AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
Strengthen support for children and families.	Ensure specific support for Victorian Aboriginal children and families.
<p>Focus on ante and post-natal support for vulnerable families.</p> <p>The parenting strategy to help parents deal with specific children’s behaviour issues.</p> <p>Re-focus of adult services, such as drug and alcohol, housing support, family violence or mental health services, to better meet the needs of children.</p>	<p>Invest in population-based funding for family services. This will ensure services are distributed across the State – particularly on the urban fringe and in rural and regional Victoria.</p> <p>Develop these new services to complement existing supports – in partnership with the community sector and key stakeholders.</p>
Health and education assessments and enhanced leaving care supports for children and young people in out-of-home care.	Support strong links between the education, health and human services that deliver these services.
An independent Children’s Commissioner.	Ensure adequate resourcing for a fully independent Children’s Commission and supporting infrastructure, including staff with relevant expertise.

### Brain development

Research has shown that severe abuse and neglect has a serious impact on the developing brain. The scans here show the difference between the brain of a 3 year old who has experienced extreme neglect and a ‘normally developed’ three year old.



Source | Based on the research of The Child Trauma Academy ([www.ChildTrauma.org](http://www.ChildTrauma.org)) led by Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. Image found at: <http://www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk/brainDevelopment>.

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# YOUNG PEOPLE

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## THE ISSUES

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**The transition from childhood to adulthood is an exciting, difficult and confusing time for most young people. Those who have a safe and supportive home life and good educational opportunities are usually able to make the most of their potential and make the right decisions for a positive future. Others aren't so lucky and need extra support, guidance and encouragement.**

Whether they are struggling to stay engaged at school because of family violence or homelessness, living away from home because of experiences of abuse, dealing with issues of sexuality, or struggling with peer relationships, evidence shows that young people who lack support at this crucial stage of life are more likely to end up making poor decisions, compromising their own life opportunities and potentially causing harm to others.

Recent state budgets have seen considerable decreases in funding for youth services. VCOSS looks to the Coalition Government to prioritise improving outcomes for young people in Victoria.

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## THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

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Young Victorians require a training system that is accessible, affordable and flexible enough to accommodate changing pathways. VCOSS therefore welcomes the Coalition's commitment to re-establish concession fee places for students studying at Diploma and Advanced Diploma level. The impact of recent reforms also needs to be considered, particularly in relation to narrow eligibility criteria. This will provide young people more time to determine career pathways.

VCOSS welcomes the Coalition's commitment to targeted support for same sex attracted and gender questioning young people, along with mental health investment in *Headspace* and eating disorders programs.

A further positive step is the Government's commitment to work collaboratively with the community sector to prevent young people entering the youth justice system.

The announcement of a planned new youth centre in Bairnsdale has also been warmly welcomed by VCOSS members working in that community.

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## STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

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Currently the distribution of services that engage young people and link them into positive programs and activities is very patchy, with too few services delivered in particular on the urban fringe and in rural and regional Victoria. The planned youth centre for Bairnsdale will help fill these gaps in the Gippsland region and similar new centres are a priority for other locations where youth disengagement has been a challenge.

More intensive supports are also needed for young people who are particularly at risk. The evidence demonstrates that a case management approach that is able to link young people to specialist supports, such as mental health or drug and alcohol services, achieves the best outcomes.

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## AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

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Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
Re-establish concession fee places for students studying at Diploma and Advanced Diploma level.	<p>Reinstate \$100 concession rates for Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses.</p> <p>Expand the eligibility criteria for government-subsidised VET places to include students up to the age of 25.</p>
Work collaboratively with the community sector to prevent young people entering the youth justice system.	Better integrated support for young offenders will lead to improved rehabilitation, particularly if it comes with independent support and youth-specific legal advice.
Targeted supports for same sex attracted and gender questioning young people, along with mental health investment in <i>Headspace</i> and eating disorders programs.	<p>Ensure programs are available across Victoria, particularly on the urban fringes and in rural and regional areas.</p> <p>Invest in holistic case management supports for at-risk young people.</p>
Establish a new youth centre in Bairnsdale.	Expand this model across other areas of metropolitan and rural and regional Victoria, with investments in capital, workforce and services.

### Brain research

Research shows that brain development during adolescence is just as significant as in the early years (see Children and Families section), with significant connections or 'wiring-up' occurring in the area of the brain responsible for such functions as behaviour, decision making, judgement, planning and impulse control. Much of this is influenced by a young person's experiences.

Source | A Fuller, *Don't Waste Your Breath – An introduction to the mysterious world of the adolescent brain*, viewed at: <http://www.andrewfuller.com.au>, 13 December 2010.

Department of Human Services, 2008, *Vulnerable Youth Framework Discussion Paper*, Victorian Government, Melbourne.

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# CHANGING CLIMATE & EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

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## THE ISSUES

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**The demands of a changing climate, of the increasing frequency and severity of heatwaves, floods, bushfires and dryness facing Victorian communities, is a key challenge for government. These demands place pressure on all communities, but some communities and some people within communities are more vulnerable.**

The Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Final Report highlighted that nearly half the people who died in the 2009 bushfires were vulnerable due to age, acute or chronic illness, or disability. Similarly, the January 2009 heatwave preceding Black Saturday caused the deaths of 374 Victorians, many of whom were vulnerable.

Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of people who lack the supports normally available from family and friends, particularly those who are frail and elderly, chronically ill, or infants is an important priority for a government planning for and responding to a changing climate.

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## THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

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As the heatwaves, in particular, demonstrated, quality housing is key to keeping people safe and well in a changing climate. The Coalition recognised this in a number of important commitments: to upgrade Victoria's existing housing stock to achieve an average 5-star standard by 2020, continue programs to upgrade public housing, and to review the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* and consider introduction in the Act of minimum standards.

VCOSS also welcomes the Coalition's in-principle commitment to implement the recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission that specifically deal with the need for increased support to vulnerable members of the community. These supports will be most effective if they are developed in partnership with community members and with agencies delivering support, including the community sector and local government.

Also important are the commitments to resource local bushfire planning. This will achieve the most impact if there are also plans and resources put in place for community sector organisations to assist vulnerable clients to relocate or evacuate. Prior to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires many community sector organisations had not been actively engaged in local municipal emergency planning, resulting in a lack of clarity as to roles around the fires. This impacted on the capacity of organisations to organise and provide sufficient emergency relief, accessible transport, accommodation options and other services and supports such as counselling.

Emergencies such as droughts and fires affect people's health in ways that extend beyond the time of crisis. VCOSS welcomes the Coalition's recognition of the profound and lasting impacts of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires through its commitment to ongoing counselling.

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## STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

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Like fires, heatwaves are also potentially deadly, and people who are vulnerable may need to be relocated or directly assisted to ensure their safety. Yet many of the local plans put in place by the former Government failed to effectively provide assistance. Further evaluation and planning, and extra resources, are needed to ensure illness and deaths in future heatwaves are minimised.

People who are vulnerable to heatwaves are also more likely to be living in poor quality housing and to lack the capital required to improve the protective features of their homes. The Government has the opportunity to develop a program distinguished from the poorly managed federal insulation program by being well designed and targeted to households that are most vulnerable in heatwaves.

The long-term recovery of individuals and families affected by bushfires requires ongoing investment in a flexible range of supports to address ongoing and emerging needs for counselling, family violence services, drug and alcohol programs, and specific child and youth focused programs.

An important lesson from Victoria's experience with drought, floods and fires has been that the health impacts of change can be both unexpected and serious. Local government is required, under the *Climate Change Act 2010*, to consider the impacts of climate change in Municipal Health Plans, yet these health impacts are little understood. The Coalition Government can help drive that understanding with research to better inform planning and responses, at both state and local levels.

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## AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

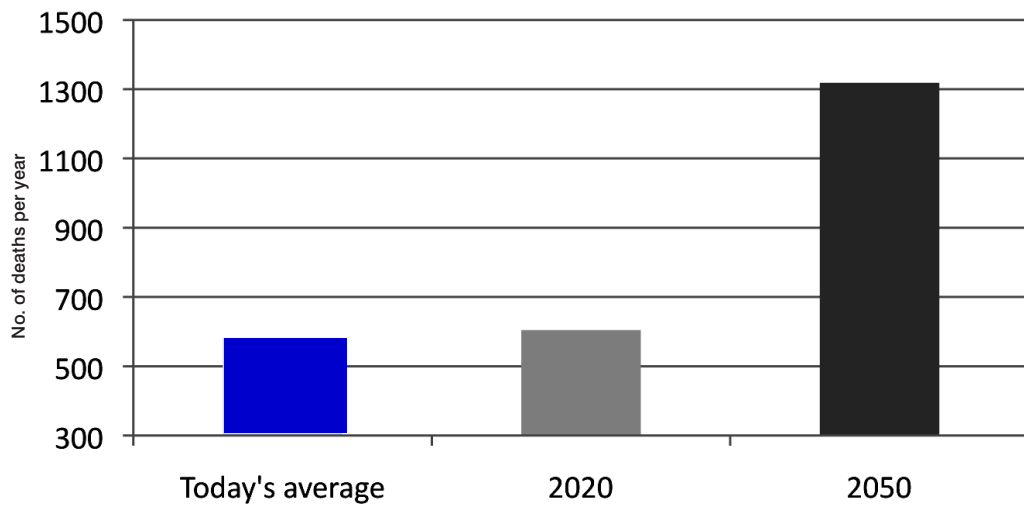
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Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
<p>Upgrade Victoria's existing housing stock to achieve an average 5-star standard by 2020.</p> <p>Continue public housing upgrades to improve the energy and thermal efficiency of homes.</p> <p>Review the <i>Residential Tenancies Act 1997</i> and consider introduction of minimum standards.</p>	<p>Develop a package of advice and subsidies targeted to assisting the households that are most vulnerable in heatwaves to improve the thermal efficiency of their homes.</p> <p>Evaluate and improve Heatwave Plans and allocate extra resources to protect the health of people needing direct assistance or relocation.</p>
<p>Implement the recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission that specifically deal with the need for increased support to vulnerable members of the community.</p>	<p>Develop supports in partnership with community members, the community sector and local government.</p>
<p>Resource local bushfire planning.</p>	<p>Resource local community sector organisations to participate in local Emergency Management plans so as to best assist vulnerable clients to relocate or evacuate – including the necessary accessible transport and accommodation options – and to best meet the needs of local communities.</p>
<p>Ongoing counselling for people affected by bushfires.</p>	<p>Ongoing investment in a flexible range of supports to address existing and emerging needs for counselling, family violence services, drug and alcohol programs, and specific child and youth focused programs.</p>
	<p>Invest in research into the impacts of changing climate conditions on health to better inform statewide adaptation planning.</p>

## Projected increases in heat related deaths

Increased frequency of heatwaves put vulnerable members of the Victorian community at risk, especially those who have fewer options to escape from the heat due to poor housing conditions, limited income and isolation.

Source | Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment *Climate change in Victoria: a summary*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2006



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# COSTS OF LIVING

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## THE ISSUES

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**Rising prices for energy and water have put unprecedented pressure on household budgets, particularly for those on low and fixed incomes.**

As the costs of living grow, struggling households are at risk of 'utilities stress': where they can't afford to heat or cool their homes, or must go without other essentials – such as food or medication – to pay utilities bills. Mounting unpaid or partially paid bills can also create long-term financial problems.

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## THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

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The Coalition's 17.5 per cent year-round electricity concession will make a real difference for low and fixed income households, particularly aged pensioners, sole parents, and people with disabilities.

Considering minimum standards when reviewing the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* offers an excellent opportunity to directly help vulnerable households cut energy and water bills and get better value from the year-round concession.

The commitment to provide better energy efficiency information and advice to consumers will also help households understand and take control of their energy consumption.

Along with other key community sector organisations, VCOSS campaigned for the moratorium on the roll-out by the former Government of smart meters until a full study could be undertaken on the impact of time-of-use tariffs on household budgets. We therefore welcome the Coalition Government's commitment to revise the cost recovery regulations of the smart meter project. VCOSS believes the short term costs should accrue to distribution businesses in proportion to the medium term benefits they stand to gain, rather than being passed through to consumers.

Government support for a number of water efficiency measures, in particular the commitment to move all existing housing stock to meet an average 5-star rating, is also welcome.

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## STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

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### Electricity

The introduction of smart meters will be a penalty on most concession households unless they are provided with in-home displays as part of the roll-out and have their charge subsidised.

Poor quality housing also often causes high energy consumption. Outdated or faulty fixtures (such as heaters, toilets, showers and hot water systems) and appliances (air conditioners, heaters, fridges, washing machines), lack of insulation or heating, or poor weatherproofing can all lead to unavoidably high energy or water consumption.

Introducing minimum rental housing standards into the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* and providing a coordinated package of subsidies and advice for low-income households to upgrade their energy and water efficiency would significantly reduce usage and thus bills.

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### Gas

The Government's plan to expand the reticulated gas network in some parts of rural and regional Victoria offers the promise of cheaper heating and hot water in those areas – so long as low-income households are assisted with the otherwise prohibitive costs of connecting their homes to the network and purchasing natural gas appliances, and the owners of low cost rental housing are provided with inducements to connect to the network.

To assist all Victorians to better manage the costs of living, the Government needs to continue the expansion of the reticulated gas network to all remaining areas of Victoria.

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### Water

Increasing the volumetric portion of bills threatens to add significantly to the costs of households that can't improve their water efficiency because they either can't afford or are not able to install water-efficient fixtures. Expanded audit and retrofit programs could assist these households.

Additionally, the cap on the volumetric water concession (around \$25 per bill) will limit its benefit to a larger group of vulnerable households, particularly rental households whose bills will double.

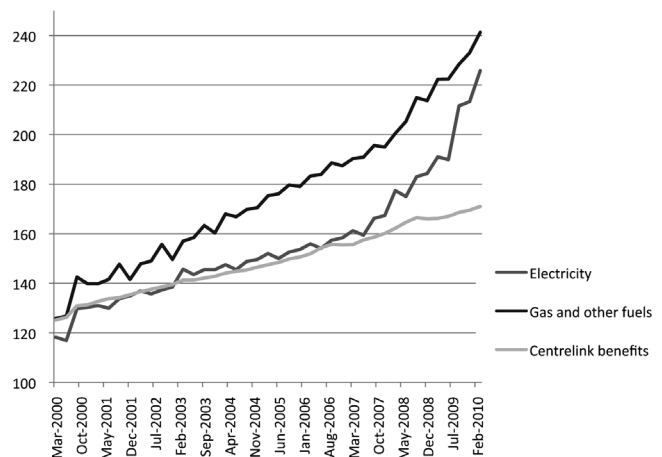
## AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
<p>Implement the year-round 17.5 per cent electricity concession for low and fixed income households.</p> <p>Provide better energy efficiency information and advice so households can understand and act on energy consumption.</p>	<p>Introduce minimum rental housing standards into the <i>Residential Tenancies Act 1997</i> that include measures for energy and water efficiency.</p> <p>Provide integrated subsidies and advice to help low-income households upgrade the energy and water efficiency of their homes, and repair or replace inefficient, old or faulty appliances.</p>
<p>Revise the cost recovery regulations of the smart meter project.</p>	<p>Apportion more costs to distribution businesses to reflect the benefits they will gain.</p> <p>Provide free in-home displays and subsidise meter charges for low-income households.</p>
<p>Introduce water efficiency measures, particularly to move existing housing stock to meet an average 5-star rating.</p>	<p>Remove the cap on the water and sewerage concession, and review its effectiveness in the face of higher volumetric charges.</p> <p>Ensure tenants can benefit from efficiency measures.</p>
<p>Expand the reticulated gas network in regional Victoria.</p>	<p>Assist low-income households (and induce owners of low cost rental housing) to connect to network and purchase natural gas appliances, and continue expansion to all remaining areas of Victoria.</p>

### The rising costs of 'the basics'

Increases in electricity and gas prices compared to the increase in Centrelink benefits.

Source | Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010), *Consumer Price Index, TABLE 7. CPI: Group, Sub-group and Expenditure Class, Weighted Average of Eight Capital Cities*, Australian Government Canberra.



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COMMUNITY  
SECTOR  
SUSTAINABILITY

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## THE ISSUES

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There are many times when Victorians need help to get by. Community services are there for them at those times, whether it's at the frontline in a crisis like the 2009 Bushfires or in longer-term work to build stronger communities. The many supports provided by the sector include: helping people find emergency housing, supporting people with disabilities to lead independent lives, caring for children and helping families who aren't coping, and helping people address problematic drug and alcohol use.

As the Productivity Commission identified, the community sector also makes a significant contribution to the national economy – contributing nearly 7 per cent to annual growth, \$43 billion to Australia's GDP, and around 8 per cent of employment.

Yet, despite increasing demand and complexity in their work, community sector workers are among the lowest paid in Australia. That makes it difficult to attract and retain skilled staff. Lack of strategic funding for the sector also means that organisations are limited in their ability to invest in efficiency measures – for example ICT, management training, and legal resources – without pulling funds from service delivery.

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## THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

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VCOSS welcomes the Coalition's recognition of the critical importance that community services play in caring for Victoria's most vulnerable individuals and their families and sees it as the foundation to strengthen the ability of community sector organisations to fulfil this role.

We also look forward to working in partnership with the Government on its commitment to develop a comprehensive community sector workforce strategy.

VCOSS also very much welcomes the Coalition's commitments to support the decision by Fair Work Australia regarding the pay equity case for community sector organisations undertaking work on behalf of the Victorian Government.

A further positive step is the Coalition's in-principle support for the introduction of a Community Sector Portable Long Service Leave scheme. The challenge to address will be to introduce a scheme that encourages highly skilled workers to stay in the sector while not diverting funds from service delivery.

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## STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

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Community sector organisations could strengthen the impact and outcomes of their work – as the Productivity Commission's research report on the *Contribution of the not-for-profit sector* identified last year – if they had better organisational supports, in ICT, legal, human resources, management and financial areas.

Funding for community services also should reflect the full cost of service delivery. Currently the unit price paid by Government for many services is far less than it costs to deliver them. All funding for service delivery by community sector organisations should be subject to whole-of-government rates of price indexation.

## AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
Recognition of the critical importance that community services play in caring for Victoria's most vulnerable individuals and their families.	Fund the full unit cost of providing services. Introduce whole-of-government rates of price indexation.
Commitment to fund outcomes of the Fair Work Australia pay equity case for community service workers in Victoria for \$200 million over four years.	Fully fund the outcomes of the Fair Work Australia pay equity case.
Develop and implement a community sector workforce strategy.	Invest in community sector workforce initiatives as part of the workforce strategy.
In-principle support for the introduction of a Community Sector Portable Long Service Leave scheme.	Introduce a portable long service leave scheme that encourages highly skilled workers to stay in the sector while not diverting funds from service delivery.

### Unfair wages

Australia's not-for-profit sector employs nearly 900,000 people and contributes \$43 billion to the nation's GDP – six times more than the mining sector, according to the Productivity Commission. Yet social and community service workers (covered by the SACS award) are paid far less than workers doing the same work but for different employers, such as government.

SACS WORKER (WAGES PER WEEK)	
Social worker, Class 2, Year 3	\$902.50
Social worker, Class 3, Year 1	\$922.26
Social worker, Class 4, Year 1	\$992.94

COMPARABLE WORKER	
Social worker in public hospital, Grade 2, Year 4	\$1,239.00
Sole Community Health Nurse, Grade 4A, Year 1	\$1,285.00
Child protection worker, Grade 5, Year 1 – Department of Human Services (DHS)	\$1,407.00

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# DISABILITY & SENIORS

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## THE ISSUES

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**People with disabilities and those who are frail and elderly continue to struggle to live life as they choose, with opportunities curtailed by gaps in crucial support services and by an inaccessible built environment.**

The limitations and stress imposed by these barriers can also extend to carers.

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## THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

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VCOSS warmly welcomes the Coalition Government's proactive support for the proposed National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which is currently under review by the Productivity Commission.

Immediate investment is also needed to address funding gaps and guarantee the availability of services, and consequently we welcome the Coalition commitments to new investments in supported accommodation, and to improving access to disability aids and equipment.

Also positive is the Coalition's commitment to review the options for accommodation of people with disabilities and enhance the accountability and transparency of services. Accommodation has long been a vexed issue with grossly inadequate investment, and service models that too often compromise people's ability to exercise control over who they live with and how their home life works. To be a success this review will need to engage people with disabilities, and community sector stakeholders.

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## STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

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The shift in service provision towards individual support packages – with their focus on individual choice and control – is a welcome and important move but comes with some risks. Investing in independent advice and advocacy alongside individual support packages, and ensuring that advice is provided by a different agency than the one delivering services, is important to safeguard vulnerable consumers.

Individual support packages also need to be complemented by investments in base funding to ensure a continued availability of specialist and local services, and be adequate to 'purchase' the supports needed to fully participate in life.

Tailored programs and reform are also needed in the justice system to ensure fair treatment of people with disabilities - particularly brain injuries and other cognitive impairments, and those with mental illness.

Addressing barriers in the physical environment is also critical if people are to be able to live independent lives. In the transport chapter we discuss strategies to ensure people can get to where they want to go, including investing in public transport accessibility, expanding the eligibility of the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program and developing a community transport plan.

Improving the accessibility of homes is another important strategy to enhance independence for people with disabilities and those who are frail and elderly, and also ensure scarce government resources are not wasted. Currently, many Home and Community Care resources are used for activities, such as showering, that many people could do independently if their shower was step-free. Inaccessible homes also mean many people cannot be discharged from hospital or must move early to supported accommodation, such as a nursing home. As the population ages, these unnecessary costs will rapidly increase.

The Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission (VCEC) undertook a regulatory impact study in 2010 of building regulations that would ensure most new homes are built to include no-cost and low-cost accessibility features. Introducing these regulations in 2011 will enable growing demand for aged care and disability services to be effectively contained.

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## AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

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Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
<p>Proactive support for a National Disability Insurance Scheme.</p> <p>Additional investment in aids and equipment.</p>	<p>Invest to address funding gaps and guarantee the availability of services.</p> <p>Strengthen the unit prices for disability services.</p> <p>Increase the availability and adequacy of individual support packages, and invest in base funding of services to ensure a continued availability of specialist and local services.</p> <p>Resource independent advice and support to protect consumers of individual support packages.</p> <p>Meet the <i>Disability Discrimination Act</i> requirements for access to public transport, expand eligibility of the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program, and develop a community transport plan.</p>
<p>Additional investment in supported accommodation and a review of accommodation options and models.</p>	<p>Implement building regulations to ensure minimum accessible housing standards for new residential housing.</p> <p>Engage people with disabilities and community sector stakeholders in the review.</p>
	<p>Fund appropriate treatment and services for people with disabilities in correctional facilities.</p>

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EDUCATION  
& EARLY  
CHILDHOOD  
DEVELOPMENT

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## THE ISSUES

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**A quality, flexible, accessible and integrated education and early childhood education and care system best supports the learning and development of all children and young people, giving them the tools to succeed in life.**

Yet many Victorian children and young people miss out because programs don't meet their particular needs.

In Victoria, inadequate resourcing of Government schools also means that education comes with many costs that limit the full participation of children and young people from struggling families.

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## THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

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The Government has made a number of important commitments that recognise how important it is for all children and young people to fully participate in education and early childhood development.

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### Early childhood development

In early education, VCOSS has welcomed the Coalition's commitment to improve access to kindergarten for children with a disability or developmental delay, especially through increased funding for Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services (KISS) and the broadening of the narrow KISS eligibility criteria.

The recognition that there is a gap between kindergarten funding and the actual operating cost for rural and regional kindergartens is an important step to strengthening these programs. Extending operational grants to all funded early childhood services, and investing in the skills and capacity of the early childhood workforce, would go a long way to taking the financial pressure off kindergarten committees and improving access to kindergarten and the quality of programs.

VCOSS also commends the Coalition's commitment to the importance of universal access to early childhood education and to Victoria's leadership in early childhood, particularly in the COAG National Quality Reform Agenda.

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## Education

A key challenge in education will be ensuring that mainstream primary and secondary education environments become more inclusive and are better supported to provide high quality learning environments to all children and young people. The education system as a whole, including schools, needs to provide more comprehensive and flexible learning environments to better meet the needs of all children and young people, including Aboriginal students, students with a disability or developmental delay, those in out-of-home care, and those who are experiencing a range of social issues. Improved approaches are also required for students in the middle years to better prevent disengagement.

The Coalition has made some welcome commitments that will better support the education of all Victorian children and young people. A key initiative for schools is the welcome commitment to additional Primary Welfare Officers (PWOs) to provide early diagnosis and referral for students and families needing help. Their appointment alone, however, will not make the difference that is needed – to achieve the most impact, support services must be available when the PWOs make a referral. Partnerships and working arrangements between schools and local community sector organisations can better provide seamless support for the many issues that students and their families face.

Alongside this support, many young people still struggle with school and may disengage for a range of reasons, such as family disruption, poverty, mental health issues, and drug and alcohol problems. Re-engaging them is vital but challenging, and consequently we look forward to the Coalition's promised flexible learning pilot program to address this critical issue, alongside the commitment to improve Year 12 retention rates in rural and regional areas.

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## STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

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### Early childhood development

In 2011-12 early childhood urgently needs capital investment to keep Victoria at the forefront of providing world-class early childhood facilities and programs, particularly as the COAG commitment to 15 hours of 4-year old kindergarten is being rolled out.

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### Education

Broader investment is needed to strengthen partnerships between schools and local community sector organisations. These partnerships have been demonstrated to support better outcomes for children and young people, and to help them remain engaged or to re-engage with education.

Investment is also needed to sustain and build on existing programs that have demonstrated success across the state in supporting young people to remain engaged or to re-engage in education.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence recently found the annual cost of full participation in education in Victoria was \$3,624 for primary school and \$3,928 for secondary school. These costs are impossibly prohibitive for struggling families and too often mean children miss out. Providing class sets of text books and no-cost camps and excursions reduces the pressure on families while delivering critical educational opportunities to vulnerable children and young people.



















































