



# Youth Policy

Building Stronger  
Youth Engagement  
in Victoria

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in an accessible format email  
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## Minister's foreword

Young Victorians play an enormous part in the social and cultural fabric of our state. As passionate advocates for issues, they are at the forefront of progressive thinking and policy making, and they make valuable contributions to public debate.

The Andrews Labor Government's Youth Policy strengthens how we engage with young people and embed their voice in building an even better Victoria.

Young people themselves are often overlooked when developing services, policies and programs on issues that are important to them. This approach is no longer acceptable. Our Youth Policy redefines government's relationship with young people and will ensure that their views are heard as services, policies and programs are developed.

The policy will create opportunities right across government for us to engage with young people, including those whose voices often go unheard. It will allow us to develop solutions and ideas together and guide future services, policies and programs that impact on young people's lives.

Our commitment to meeting the needs of young people throughout the course of their lives means we need to provide hope about their future. Critical to this is making sure our policies and initiatives provide the support and engagement that young people need to be their best.

Supporting and engaging young people at every stage of their journey requires collaboration across government. It also means understanding how we can better engage and work with young people to improve their outcomes, particularly those facing or experiencing disadvantage.

We need to value all young people for who they are, and we have to listen to what they have to say.

I am proud to present this new Youth Policy. As a passionate advocate for young people in Victoria, I believe that their voices must be woven into government so they influence issues that affect them. Young people are experts in their own right and their perspectives, experiences and opinions are important to ensure we are developing effective services, and building the strongest possible state.

Last year we listened to young Victorians from across the state and have come up with a plan that will:

- shape key government reforms, including services, policies and programs to benefit young people
- establish a Youth Engagement Charter to guide government engagement on policy and reform
- implement engagement channels for young people to shape change, see policy ideas come to life, and hold the government to account.

Through the consultation we also heard about the issues that matter most to young people, such as education, mental health and employment. We are working hard to address these issues through a whole of government reform agenda which includes the Education State and the reform of the Vocational Educational and Training system, our Back to Work and Jobs Victoria agenda, the 10-Year Mental Health Plan, the Roadmap for Reform: strong families, safe children, and our response to the findings of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

I would like to thank all the young people, parents, families, carers and representatives from the youth and community sectors, local government, academia and the private sector for contributing to the consultation process. Your insights and feedback have been vital in shaping this policy and will feed into our ongoing agenda to improve the lives of young people in Victoria. I would also like to recognise the commitment and significant contribution of the 18 young people who formed the Youth Reference Group and helped us to develop this Youth Policy.



**Jenny Mikakos MP**  
Minister for Youth Affairs





# Introduction

## Engaging young people in the development of the policy

The development of the Youth Policy has been informed by the views expressed by young Victorians, through an extensive consultation process in 2015–2016.

Over 2,000 young people from a diverse range of age groups, backgrounds, cultures and locations provided input through online surveys, digital engagement, youth-led forums and consultation sessions facilitated by community service organisations.

The consultation engaged young people whose voices are often unheard such as young Aboriginal people, young people from culturally diverse communities, young people living with a disability, young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) and young people who live in regional and rural areas of Victoria.

A Youth Reference Group was also established to shape the purpose and content of the policy. The group comprised 18 young people from different backgrounds and experiences who provided valuable advice about the policy and effective engagement mechanisms to enable young people to have their voices heard and to contribute ideas and solutions to government policy and decision making in the future.

In addition, widespread consultation was undertaken with parents, families and carers, the youth and community sectors, local government, academia, the private sector, and across government.

There are nearly **one million** young people in Victoria aged **12 to 24 years.<sup>1</sup>**

## Acting on what young people said during consultation

Through the consultation process, young people provided rich and valuable information about the issues that mattered most to them. They also highlighted the particular challenges and social and economic disadvantage that some young people face in their daily lives.

Of the priorities identified by young people who participated in the consultation process, three issues were common to all – education, employment and mental health. Other issues ranked as important included identity, culture and belonging, discrimination, alcohol and drugs, housing, vocational training and transport.

**Significantly, over 90 per cent of young participants indicated that they wanted to work with government to address these issues.**

The Youth Policy acknowledges the priority issues for young Victorians. Many are being addressed by our social and economic reform agenda which will improve outcomes for all Victorians, and especially young Victorians.

These reforms include the Education State, including rebuilding Victoria's Vocational Educational and Training system, the Back to Work and Jobs Victoria agenda, the 10-Year Mental Health Plan, the Roadmap for Reform and the Victorian Government's response to the findings of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

While the Youth Policy is intended to engage and deliver improved outcomes for all young Victorians, the reform agenda has a strong focus on better supporting and empowering young people who experience disadvantage and face social, community and economic barriers.

Specific initiatives are being implemented to improve the lives of young Aboriginal people, young people from culturally diverse communities, young people living with a disability, LGBTI young people and young people who live in regional and rural areas of Victoria.

Significantly, the Youth Policy provides a framework and actions that will better engage young people in the future and lead to government policies, services and programs that better meet the needs of all young people in Victoria.

## What's important to youth?

2015–2016 Consultation Snapshot

Over  
2,000

Young people participated in total

1,800

Visits to consultation website

82

Contributors to the community, youth and learning sector survey

29

Contributors to the local government survey

21

Contributors to the parents, carers and families survey

1,003

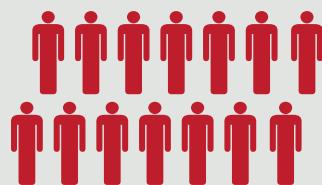
Young people responded to our survey

17.8%  
aged  
12-14

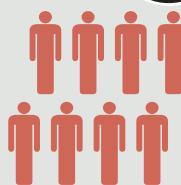
54.7%  
aged  
15-19

27.5%  
aged  
20-24

67.9%  
identify as  
female



30.2%  
identify as male



1.9%  
identify as other



7.4%



Identify as Aboriginal or  
Torres Strait Islander

2%



Are international students

12.9%



Were born overseas

19.1%



Speak a language other  
than English at home

14.3%



Identify as LGBTI

13.5%



Have a disability

58.2%



Live in metropolitan  
municipalities

41.8%



Live in rural or regional Victoria



# Youth Reference Group Letter to the Premier

Dear Premier

It was such an honour to be a part of the development of the Youth Policy for Victoria. Minister Mikakos' announcement in August 2015 led to us, a group of young people from all different backgrounds, collaborating together for the Victorian Government's 'What's Important to Youth' Youth Reference Group.

Our experiences gave us insights into the way government works and how it produces policy. We respectfully discussed many topics, listened to every opinion and gained knowledge from the experiences of every young person in the group. The passion, spirit and excitement from the group never faded and what we discussed was important and so we felt we had a real chance to make an impact and to empower the rest of youth in Victoria.

Being a young person in Victoria can be quite challenging. In the past it was felt that we didn't always have the support we needed to influence policy because attitudes around youth were – and still in some parts remain – negative. We had people telling us what we needed and how our future should be. The Youth Policy, in our view, is a positive change in the right direction. Having our voice heard and taken into consideration will help us shape proper youth engagement and support.

Participating in the development of the Youth Policy proved to also be an empowering and insightful experience for all members of the Youth Reference Group. In addition to being able to provide our insight and opinions into the Youth Policy's development, more generally, we were all impressed and content with the fact there was simply going to be a Youth Policy existing for our community that values our experiences as young people in Victoria. It often made us wonder what governments of the past did to familiarise themselves with the issues of the youth of the day, but more importantly, it made us feel hopeful and excited because we now have an expectation for the future where the Victorian Government works on communicating with youth and values our input.

This experience allowed us to have a genuine look into what politics and youth engagement could be like in the future. There will always be improvements to be made but the experiences of being on the Youth Reference Group have confirmed our affirmation that it can and will work and that excites us.

Premier, we now put the challenge to the Victorian Government. Governments are always looking at ways to establish communities for the future, so the Victorian Government must act and remain committed to young people because we are the future. We have a lot to offer and given the opportunity we will provide the current and the future youth of Victoria a fighting chance.

Yours truly  
The Youth Reference Group

---

Caitlin Meyer – YMCA

Danielle Farah – Youth Affairs Council of Victoria

Indi Clarke – Koorie Youth Council

Kieran Stubbs – Headspace

Levi Graves – Create Foundation

Luke David – Youth Disability Advocacy Service

Lynette Irungu – Council of International Students Australia

Mahbooba (Em) Nazari – Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition

Margot Fink – Minus18

Matt Di Toro – Minus18

Monica McDonald – Victorian NAIDOC Committee

Priya Serrao – Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network

Rajat Lal – Youth Central Roving Reporter

Safa Almarhoun – Social Cohesion and Community Resilience Advisory Group

Sam Illobuchi – Victorian Student Representative Council

Shaun Hardy – Youth Support and Advocacy Service

Wattie Hutcheon – National Indigenous Leadership Academy

Zanruwa Mazae – Centre for Multicultural Youth

# Engaging young people in ideas and solutions

The way in which communities interact with government is changing. Communities are demanding greater transparency and want a role in the design of services, policies and programs that affect their lives. More effective services, policies and programs are created when communities are involved.

We are committed to creating an inclusive society in which young people are empowered to voice their ideas and concerns, are listened to and are recognised for their valuable contribution to Victoria.

While the views of young people are already being sought through some government programs, the Youth Policy reflects our commitment to engage with young Victorians aged 12 to 24 years in a new way and includes principles to guide youth engagement and participation. It will be used to influence practice across government to give young people a stronger voice in shaping the way services, policies and programs are designed and delivered.

It redefines the government's relationship with young people and values the important interconnecting relationships between young people, government, the community and youth sectors, local government, academia, philanthropy and the private sector. Flagship projects will underpin and help to support this new partnership approach.

The vision and purpose of this policy emphasise meaningful engagement with young people.

## Vision

An inclusive society where all young people are empowered to voice their ideas and concerns, are listened to and are recognised for their valuable contributions to Victoria.

## Purpose

To create mechanisms, provide guidance and support initiatives to empower young people to input into government services, policies and programs that are important to them.

## **The Youth Engagement Charter**

The Youth Policy includes a Youth Engagement Charter (the Charter) that outlines the principles that will guide the government's engagement with young people and how the government will give effect to these principles in practice.

The principles relate to:

- recognition and respect for young Aboriginal people
- valuing cultural diversity and showing cultural respect and sensitivity
- treating all young people fairly and respecting their rights
- supporting the role of young people in decision making
- promoting inclusivity and celebrating diversity
- empowering young people to shape decision making.

The government will use this Charter to guide it in:

- creating policy and shaping reform
- communicating with young Victorians
- delivering programs and services
- evaluating performance and outcomes.

## Youth Engagement Charter

Guiding principles	Government will:
 <b>1. Recognition and respect for Aboriginal people as the first people of Australia</b> <p>Policies that impact on Aboriginal young people must promote self-determination, self-governance, connection to land and culture, and build on the strengths and resilience of Aboriginal communities and their young people. Aboriginal young people are the current and future leaders in their communities and beyond. Listening to their voices and hearing what is important to them is the foundation of working together to create new ways to design programs and deliver services.</p>	1.1 Recognise and respect the culture and connection to land as a right of Aboriginal young people. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1.2 Recognise the importance of culture to self-esteem and identity. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
 <b>2. Cultural respect, understanding and awareness</b> <p>Victoria values cultural diversity and enables young people to practise their culture free of discrimination.</p>	2.1 Remain committed to culturally sensitive engagement with young people that respects and celebrates diversity. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
 <b>3. Equality</b> <p>Young people must be valued and treated fairly, regardless of their circumstances, gender, sexuality, ability, faith or background. The diversity of experiences, abilities, identities and cultures of young people must be acknowledged and valued, underpinned by a commitment to eliminate all forms of inequality and discrimination.</p>	3.1 Respect the rights of all young people to participate in decisions that affect their lives. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 3.2 Value young people as experts in their own experiences, recognising them as equal partners in identifying and implementing solutions. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
 <b>4. Youth-centred</b> <p>Young people are the experts in their own experience. Young people must be at the centre of decision making about issues that are important to them. This leads to smarter and more effective policy and program design.</p>	4.1 Recognise that young people must be at the centre of decision making about issues that are important to them. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 4.2 Utilise innovative engagement mechanisms. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
 <b>5. Belonging, connectedness and identity</b> <p>Connectedness to family, peers and community must be prioritised in order for young people to have a sense of belonging and identity. They need to be able to express their identity.</p>	5.1 Commit to promoting inclusiveness and celebrating diversity. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 5.2 Ensure youth engagement mechanisms remain inclusive, with a focus on developing peer relationships. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
 <b>6. Empowerment</b> <p>Young people must be supported and encouraged to act on their own authority and represent their own interests. Young people have the capacity and ability to drive change and shape their own destinies.</p>	6.1 Value young people as genuine partners in decision-making processes. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 6.2 Ensure respect, transparency and integrity underpin all aspects of youth engagement. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

# Engagement in action

## Action areas

Our Youth Policy includes three action areas for youth engagement:

- Amplifying the voice of Victorian youth in government priority setting
  - to more systematically capture youth views on broad government actions and priorities
- Increasing youth participation in youth-focused policy, program and service design
  - to actively involve young people in the design of youth-focused services, policies and programs
- Empowering individual young people in their own care
  - by creating the expectation and building the capability of government and service providers to actively involve young people in decision-making processes that directly affect them.

The youth-focused action areas represent points along the engagement spectrum, going from the broadest possible reach on the largest number of topics to more intensive co-design processes on specific policies, programs and services.

Flagship engagement projects will be strategically designed in each action area and will be evaluated to demonstrate how the Youth Policy is being applied. The flagship engagement projects will showcase innovative methods of youth engagement and participation, and provide information on optimal approaches to engage young people.



## 1. Amplifying the voice of Victorian youth in government priority setting

Currently, most communication with young people is a one-way transaction from government to young people. There are few channels for young people to speak to government. In order for government to engage in more responsive decision making, the unique contribution of young people must be actively sought.

Young people must be empowered to initiate conversations and be engaged by government on actions and priorities. Young people's voices need to be amplified and new voices encouraged to participate.

Existing communication channels will be promoted and new opportunities developed to empower young people to have their voices heard by government. This action area seeks the broadest reach with the largest number of young people to provide high-level feedback on a wide range of topics. For this to be meaningful, government will explore new ways to feed back to young people on how their contributions are used.

### Flagship projects

#### Annual survey of young people in Victoria

In consultation with young people, an annual youth survey will be developed and conducted to understand trends, priority issues and action areas that are important to young people in Victoria. The annual survey will amplify youth voice and build a robust evidence base.

Findings from the survey will be referred across government agencies and community organisations so that the concerns and ideas of young people can inform future policy and practice.

#### Redeveloping Youth Central to improve two-way interaction and user experience

Youth Central, the Victorian Government website for young people, will be redeveloped to include a new visual design, a new site structure, and a review and repurposing of all site content to make it more accessible and compatible with mobile devices.

It will also provide mechanisms to enable young people to engage directly with government via an interactive platform allowing two-way dialogue.



## **2. Increasing youth participation in youth-focused policy, program and service design**

Some young people may only want to engage with government at the broadest level through the expression of their concerns and experiences. Others, however, may want to be engaged more intensively in identifying particular youth-focused issues and developing solutions to address them.

A range of innovative engagement methods will be developed and tested to improve understanding of the most effective ways to involve young people in identifying issues and developing ideas and solutions.

### **Flagship projects**

#### **Youth Summit**

A Youth Summit will be held annually bringing together young people from across Victoria to decide and act on issues important to them and their peers. Representatives will be drawn from across Victoria and include young people from local government advisory groups, as well as advisory groups that work with youth sector organisations and partners. Summit attendees will develop a strategic plan and appoint an executive of young people to form a Victorian Youth Congress.

#### **Victorian Youth Congress**

The Victorian Youth Congress will be an advisory group made up of young people between the ages of 12 to 24. Representation will include young Aboriginal people, young people from culturally diverse backgrounds, LGBTI young people, young people living with a disability and young people living in regional and rural Victoria, as well as metropolitan Melbourne.

Key meetings of the Victorian Youth Congress will be attended by a Cabinet Minister to facilitate discussion of issues identified by the Youth Summit participants that are critical to young Victorians.

#### **Social policy design labs**

Social policy design labs will be conducted in partnership with youth sector representatives and young people from a range of backgrounds who come together to discuss key youth-focused issues and challenges. The design labs will explore these issues and discuss ideas and solutions and effective ways that these issues can be considered by government.

#### **Capability building**

Capability building activities will be developed in partnership with youth organisations and young people to share best practice and knowledge on youth engagement.

### **3. Empowering individual young people in their own care**

We will create the expectation and build the capability of government and sector service providers to actively involve young people in decision-making processes that directly affect them.

We will engage a broad range of young people as service users, including those who may be more difficult to reach. In doing so, we will explore opportunities to involve young people in decision making about their own care.

#### **Flagship projects**

##### **Youth Barometer**

The Youth Barometer will provide qualitative data on issues that are important to young people who may not engage in the annual youth survey. Selected non-government organisations will be supported to undertake in-depth consultation with young people who may be more difficult to reach. These may include young people in out-of-home care, young people in the youth justice system, LGBTI young people, Aboriginal young people and young people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

##### **Cross government partnerships to strengthen the voice of young people from diverse backgrounds**

A joint approach between the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, the Victorian Multicultural Commission, the Office for Youth and the Centre for Multicultural Youth will be developed to provide opportunities for young people from diverse backgrounds to advise government on critical issues affecting them, including as service users.

Current youth reference groups across government and the youth sector, for example, the Multicultural Youth Network, local government youth advisory groups and those run by the Centre for Multicultural Youth, the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, and the Koorie Youth Council, will be similarly supported to advise government on critical issues affecting them, including their perspectives on services designed to support them.

##### **Symposium on co-design**

A youth and co-design symposium of young people, government and sector representatives will be convened to showcase best practice approaches to youth engagement, co-design methods and other youth-led initiatives.



## What will success look like?

Measuring the outcomes of the Youth Policy is critical.

A detailed outcomes framework will be developed to monitor and review progress of the engagement initiatives of the policy.

The framework will guide the development of innovative projects that test methods of youth engagement and participation and assess how the policy is impacting on the lives of young people in Victoria. Indicators and measures specific to each of the action areas and to each flagship project will be developed.

The framework will be developed in consultation with young people.

## Vision

An inclusive society where all young people are empowered to voice their ideas and concerns, are listened to and are recognised for their valuable contributions to Victoria

## Purpose

To create mechanisms, provide guidance and support initiatives to empower young people to input into government services, policies and programs that are important to them

## Action Areas

### Amplifying the voice of Victorian youth in government priority setting

To more systematically capture youth views on broad government actions and priorities

### Increasing youth participation in youth-focused policy, program and service design

To actively involve young people in the design of youth-focused policy, program and service design

### Empowering individual young people in their own care

By creating the expectation and building the capability of government and service providers to actively involve young people in decision-making processes that directly affect them

## Flagship Projects

- Annual survey of young people in Victoria
- Redevelopment of the Youth Central website

- Youth Summit
- Victorian Youth Congress
- Social policy design labs
- Capability building

- Youth barometer
- Cross government partnerships to strengthen the voice of young people from diverse backgrounds
- Symposium on co-design

## Success Factors

More young people having a say about issues that affect them

More young people actively and directly influencing the design of government policies, programs and services

More young people involved in decisions about the services they receive, ensuring their goals and circumstances are reflected

## Outcomes

An outcomes framework including measures and indicators will be developed in consultation with young people



# The Report Card – measuring outcomes and reporting

The outcomes framework will be used to monitor and review progress and outcomes from the engagement initiatives of the Youth Policy and will guide projects that test innovative methods of youth engagement and participation.

The outcomes of flagship youth engagement projects and other youth engagement activities across government will be communicated via a Report Card on the Youth Central website and will be promoted using a social media strategy. Information in the Report Card will include whether the activity engaged a broad demographic or specific cohorts of young people.

The Report Card will highlight youth engagement initiatives across government and how effective they have been in engaging young people and in shaping policy and program directions.

It will also include best practice examples of youth engagement, case studies and links to relevant resources.



## Youth engagement

- → Youth Engagement Charter
- → Engagement in Action
- → Outcomes Framework
- → The Report Card

Flagship projects

## Evaluation and evidence

Evaluation of the Youth Policy will build on the evidence about effective youth participation and engagement and will itself involve young people.

Further evidence about different types of youth participation and engagement will be collected and evaluated to support improved policy and program design. Understanding ‘what works’ and sharing lessons learned through evaluation will be critical.

The outcomes and impacts of flagship youth engagement projects will be communicated through a Report Card on the Youth Central website. This will also include best practice examples, case studies, literature reviews, and links to other resources.



## Governance

Implementation of the Youth Policy will involve the active participation of young people, community and health sector organisations, and government departments and agencies.

Representatives for the Victorian Youth Congress will be elected through the annual Youth Summit. The Victorian Youth Congress will meet to discuss issues that are critical to young people in Victoria and to shape policy directions in the future. A Cabinet Minister will attend key meetings of the Youth Congress.

A sector advisory group comprising representatives from the youth and community sectors will be established to provide feedback on the implementation of the policy and future directions.

A new Youth Interdepartmental Committee will be established to oversee the implementation of the Youth Policy and to ensure a coordinated approach to the issues young people raise across government portfolios.

All three groups will provide feedback to the Minister for Youth Affairs on the implementation of the Youth Policy and its effectiveness.



# Action being taken by government on priority issues

Issues that young people identified as being important to them through the consultation process are also priorities for our government. Many are being addressed through an ambitious, progressive social and economic reform agenda that will improve outcomes for all Victorians, especially young people. These reforms include the Education State and rebuilding the Vocational Educational and Training system, the Back to Work and Jobs Victoria agenda, the 10-Year Mental Health Plan, the Roadmap for Reform, and our response to the findings of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Other actions being taken will have a positive impact on young Victorians including those related to alcohol and other drugs, housing and transport, along with initiatives supporting and empowering specific groups of young people.

## The Education State

Education is the biggest investment government makes in its young people and is a fundamental building block for success in life. We are focused on making Victoria the Education State by building an education system that, through early childhood education, schools and vocational education and training, produces excellence and reduces the impact of disadvantage so that every child gets the education they need to achieve their potential and learn the skills they need for a sound future.

## Schools

We recognise the need for a more flexible education system, for schools to be more supportive and inclusive, and to focus more on learning, life skills, building resilience and preparing for independence. The new Victorian Curriculum includes capabilities that students will require to thrive in life and work in the future.

Students have unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling, and should have the opportunity to actively shape their own education. Student voice is central to the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes and young people already contribute through the Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) and Rural Youth Ambassadors Program. The VicSRC promotes student voice and provides support to student representative councils in schools.

As an outcome of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, respectful relationships education will be rolled out to every government school in Victoria. The program focuses on challenging negative attitudes such as prejudice, discrimination and harassment that can lead to violence, often against women.

The Special Needs Plan for Victorian Schools will also improve students' achievements, engagement and wellbeing by creating fairer, safer and more inclusive schools for students with special needs. This will include modernising 20 of the state's specialist schools and better supporting children with disabilities and special needs.

The Tech Schools initiative will create 10 high-tech centres of learning that will use leading-edge technology, discovery and innovation to deliver advanced education and training so young people can flourish in the rapidly changing global economy.

Funding is provided annually to Victorian Government schools to support all young people aged 15 years and over to develop an individual Career Action Plan, and to assist young people to make a successful transition through the senior years of schooling to further education, training or employment.

Our government is establishing a new pilot program, Navigator, which aims to increase the number of young people connected to school and engaged in learning. It will be delivered in eight locations across Victoria.

In addition there will be more support for students who live in out-of-home care. LOOKOUT Education Support Centres will advocate for and support all school-aged children and young people who live in out-of-home care.

We fund a number of programs to support students, parents, teachers and principals in working together to make schools safe and supportive and prevent racism. The Bully Stoppers initiative aims to strengthen prevention and empower everyone to make a stand and become a bully stopper. Funding is also provided for eSmart schools. This is a cyber-safety initiative developed by the Alannah and Madeleine Foundation. Currently 1400 schools from all sectors are working through the eSmart schools framework.

## **Vocational education and training**

Every young person should have access to quality training so that they are equipped for jobs now and into the future. The Vocational Education and Training system is being transformed into a world class scheme that leads to jobs and prosperity for young Victorians and provides them with more educational pathways to employment. We have set out a foundation for change that includes: creating an equitable and sustainable funding system; embedding quality and continuous improvement; and placing the needs of industry, employers and students first.

Twenty new Skills and Jobs Centres will engage young people in quality training that will lead to meaningful jobs. Support for apprentices and trainees has been boosted through Group Training Organisations.

The Victorian Training Guarantee is making vocational training more accessible to people who do not hold a post-school qualification, or who want to gain a higher level qualification than they already hold, by providing government-subsidised training places.

Education First Youth Foyers are providing support to homeless young people to prepare them for participation in vocational training by providing accommodation and wrap around services.

The Reconnect program will support young people participating in the Back to Work Scheme who left school early or who are long term unemployed to reconnect with training and work.

## **Back to Work and Jobs Victoria Employment Network**

The Victorian economy is growing and we want to ensure that young people are given maximum opportunity and capacity to share in that growth.

Young people are generally well-placed to prosper from the growth of new technologies, high-skilled industries and markets. In particular, there are many economic opportunities for young people who can work with technology, think creatively, adapt easily and work collaboratively. Our focus is on supporting young people to develop the skills and capabilities they need to thrive in this environment.

At the same time, changes to the economy and labour market can create challenges for vulnerable and disengaged young people who can find it hard to compete in the labour market if they do not have experience and skills, or if they experience other barriers in their lives. The Back to Work scheme is creating more jobs now and into the future, helping people transition to new opportunities, and investing for the long term.

More apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities are being created to provide young people with training and valuable work experience. The Major Projects Skills Guarantee requires contractors on major state projects to employ apprentices and trainees to do at least 10 per cent of the work. In addition, the Youth Employment Scheme continues to provide training and work experience for young people in the public sector each year.

Vulnerable and disengaged young people need more support to obtain employment. In particular, they need targeted employment support that takes into account the range of barriers they are experiencing.

We are taking action to deliver more effective employment support to disadvantaged young job seekers. The new Jobs Victoria Employment Network will assist unemployed young people, supporting them to become work ready and linking them to career pathways and jobs. This will build on initiatives that have already been implemented to better support youth employment, such as the Back to Work scheme, which offers financial payments to employers to encourage them to hire and train more young people.

## Mental health

Improving the mental health of young people is central to Victoria's 10-Year Mental Health Plan so they can participate in all aspects of life, thrive and succeed. Mental illness accounts for a greater share of the disease burden among young people than physical illness.

The 10-Year Mental Health Plan involves people living with mental illness and their families and carers in changing how services are designed and delivered, including further engagement with young people. In addition, an Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework being developed with the Victorian Aboriginal community will address the needs of Aboriginal people including young people.

We are supporting young people to look after their mental health and act early when mental illness does develop. Together with the Commonwealth Government, the Victorian Government provides a comprehensive range of programs to support youth mental health.

Access to specialist mental health services, especially for children under 12 years of age, is also improving. Child and youth mental health is also a central concern in policies on education, early childhood, child and family services, out-of-home care, Aboriginal affairs, alcohol and drugs, and family violence.



Our Suicide Prevention Framework to be released in 2016 recognises the link between mental illness and suicide and seeks to address this. The framework will provide a whole-of-government, cross-sectoral commitment to reducing suicide and suicidal behaviour, and a coordinated strategy to deliver a set of evidence-based interventions that are targeted at suicide prevention, including among young people. This framework will include the design and testing of a Victoria-specific youth suicide prevention app. The app will link young people who are suicidal to support and help them to develop a safety plan.

We will also release a mental health workforce strategy that will support the mental health workforce to improve responses to children, young people and their families. We will partner with LGBTI people and community groups to tackle discrimination, and improve the inclusiveness of health and social services. This includes the Victorian AIDS Council, community health services, alcohol and drug treatment services, and both clinical and community mental health services.

The Healthy Equal Youth grants (HEY) are part of a larger Victorian Government funded initiative to support the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTI young people.

VicHealth's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2015-19 aims to support one million more Victorians to achieve better health and wellbeing, including increasing the resilience and connectedness of 200,000 more people by 2023. This Strategy focusses on improving the mental health of young Victorians.

## Roadmap for Reform: strong families, safe children

The Roadmap for Reform: strong families, safe children – The first steps (The Roadmap) includes once-in-a-generation changes designed to ensure all Victorian families are as safe as possible and that vulnerable children are fully supported. The Roadmap focuses on protecting children and supporting families and carers as early as possible to give young people the best chance to grow up healthy and lead better lives.

The Roadmap adopts a whole-of-government approach, and outlines how a new system will operate to better support Victoria's most vulnerable individuals, families and communities.

Key features of the Roadmap include:

- a greater focus on prevention and earlier intervention
- more visible and non-stigmatising entry points to services, making it easier for people to access services and support
- proactively connecting people at risk to support through existing services (such as early childhood services, schools, general practitioners, financial counselling and community health services) and informal networks (such as a trusted community member).

Communities including children, young people and families, as well as sector agencies will be more involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of services to harness local strengths and resources. Child and family services will play a major role within this new place-based approach to the delivery of community and social services for vulnerable populations.

To deliver this vision, the Roadmap sets out initial actions to progress three reform directions:

- building supportive and culturally strong communities and improving access to universal services
- supporting children, young people and families in need with integrated wrap around supports and targeted early interventions
- strengthening home-based care and improving outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care.

The Roadmap will include initiatives aligned with the Youth Policy, to develop and implement improved engagement platforms with young people.

For children, young people and families, this reformed system will provide:

- a 'whole-of-community' response
- comprehensive needs and risk assessment
- services that work together to meet needs and address risks
- coordinated responses
- tailored and effective interventions.



## Family violence

We have committed to implementing all of the recommendations made by the landmark Royal Commission into Family Violence.

The Royal Commission found that there is a lack of targeted resources to meet the specific needs of children and young people who have experienced family violence. In addition, the range of services a victim might need at different times, including at points of crisis and beyond, are not as well coordinated as they should be. Too little effort is devoted to preventing the occurrence of family violence in the first place, and to intervening at the earliest possible opportunity to reduce the risk of violence or its escalation. Gaining access to support can be difficult for victims, and service responses remain inconsistent and hard to navigate. All parts of the system are overwhelmed by demand.

The Royal Commission noted that family violence has a serious impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people. While many children and young people display significant resilience in the face of family violence, the impacts can include suffering injuries, homelessness, anxiety and ongoing trauma.

Recommendations made by the Royal Commission aim to increase the availability of therapeutic interventions, counselling and early intervention programs, and youth-appropriate accommodation for young people escaping family violence.

We have commenced implementing 65 of the Royal Commission's most urgent recommendations to lay the groundwork for long-term system reform. Significant investment is being made in reforms directed at children, including intensive support for children in their own home, counselling services and the continued reform of the child protection system.

Educating young people about respectful relationships will also be a core part of our government's long-term prevention strategy. There is a growing understanding of the value of investing in education, children and young people. Schools are central points of interaction between parents, educators and young people. Respectful relationships education programs offer enormous promise for transforming the attitudes and behaviours of future generations.

Ultimately, a more sustained focus on supporting children and young people, underpinned by the right of children and young people to live free from violence, should be a fundamental element of family violence reform.

# **Other government actions supporting young people**

## **Alcohol and other drugs**

Abuse of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) has a significant impact on young people, their families and communities. Victoria is the only state in Australia to have a comprehensive youth alcohol and drug service system that includes outreach, counselling, withdrawal, residential rehabilitation and supported accommodation, day programs and online support and information. Young people aged 16 years and above are also able to access adult treatment services.

Significant investment is being made in the Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS) across 29 agencies. YSAS has developed the Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice Service with responses provided by specialist youth AOD workers 24 hours a day. Four different options for engagement are available: website, web-chat, email and telephone.

In addition, youth alcohol and drug services are being expanded across the state, with youth AOD providers funded to:

- increase early intervention and support to vulnerable young people
- build the capacity of staff in key youth services to effectively identify and refer young people with substance abuse issues.

## **Victoria's Ice Action Plan**

Victoria's Ice Action Plan provides a coordinated strategy to reduce demand, supply and harm while the Ice Action Plan Framework gives effect to prevention through:

- accessible information and advice for families and communities
- supporting parents and schools to build resilience in children and young people
- reaching out to young people outside the formal school system and other groups most at risk through peer based education and other community programs.

Building the capacity of all staff working with young people is an important part of these efforts. For example the new manual for foster carers provides information on alcohol and other drug services available to young people in out-of-home care to improve access to services. It is anticipated the new manual will be published in 2016.

Preventing and minimising harm associated with AOD is a key area for action. Early engagement with young people who are using or experimenting with drugs is an important part of these efforts. This means continued engagement by the range of children's services and programs, including universal services such as schools, sport and recreational services, primary care services, as well as those services with a particular focus on young people most at risk.



## Housing

We are reforming housing and homelessness services to vulnerable young people. Reform is designed to grow the supply of social and affordable housing, integrate housing and homelessness services with the broader community services system, and ensure the ongoing financial sustainability of Victoria's social housing system as a part of our response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Area based reform of homelessness services and social housing will also be tested in three locations (Brimbank Melton, Hume Moreland and Inner Gippsland), commencing in mid-2016. For young people in particular, this will mean:

- better and more responsive access to the services they need to avoid homelessness and remain connected with family, community and education/employment
- clearer access points to housing and homelessness services and more consistent assessment of need
- an improved, more effective youth refuge response that is well connected to the broader homelessness and housing service system to end the young person's homelessness, not just address the immediate crisis
- more flexible accommodation options that provide young people with the safe, secure housing they need while building the skills needed to live independently and be engaged in their community.

## Transport

Public transport accessibility is fundamental to enabling many young people to participate in education and employment. Priorities include:

- simplifying school transport services
- equity in funding of transport assistance to students.

To help achieve this, from the start of 2016 we introduced a reduction in fares for students who pay to use the School Bus Program. We are also increasing investment in the public transport system to improve access by:

- extending its reach such as the Mernda Rail extension
- introducing new and more frequent services such as a package of improvements to bus services to universities.

Twenty-four hour public transport on weekends means young people now have a safe and affordable way to get home late. Our government has completed a review of fare enforcement which includes consideration of the impact on young people generally, and vulnerable young people in particular.

The Victorian Multicultural Commission is committed to working with Public Transport Victoria, especially in regional areas, as an advocate for accessible information about transport services for Victoria's multicultural communities.

International students have access to the International Undergraduate Student Education Pass which provides a 50 per cent discount on the cost of public transport.

**The median age for Aboriginal people is 22 years, compared to 37 years nationally<sup>2</sup>**

## Culture, identity and belonging

We recognise that culture, identity and belonging are a key issue for Aboriginal, culturally diverse and LGBTI young people and understand the significant implications and importance of tackling discrimination and racism.

## Aboriginal young people

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2013-18, which brings together government and Aboriginal community commitments and efforts to create a better future for Aboriginal Victorians, is based on a life course approach that recognises the critical role of positive experiences and opportunities for young people. Being strong in culture builds the resilience, skills, participation, and wellbeing of Aboriginal people, and is especially vital to young people.

Initiatives include a new Aboriginal youth mentoring program to create positive life change through deeper connections with education, culture, heritage and community and new programs which increase the participation of young Aboriginal people in sport. We will continue to support the Koorie Youth Council, which provides a voice for young Aboriginal Victorians to ensure that government and community programs are informed by their perspectives.

Our Aboriginal Education Plan, Marrung, underpins the delivery of the Education State to Aboriginal learners; ensuring opportunities exist to secure the full benefits of Education State reforms for Aboriginal Victorians.

Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care will have greater opportunities to connect with their culture through the provision of cultural camps. The camps will use Aboriginal cultural linkages to better connect children and young people to sport and recreation opportunities, as well as supporting improved health and wellbeing outcomes and fostering the leadership potential of participants.

Recent legislative changes will require all Aboriginal children in out-of-home care to have a cultural plan developed to support their connection to culture. This is in addition to all children involved with child protection having a case plan that includes identification of their culture and strategies to enhance their cultural identity.

Koolin Balit sets out the government's priorities for improving Aboriginal health and wellbeing. This includes initiatives that strengthen young Aboriginal people's connection to community, culture, positive social norms and healthy behaviours. In addition, an Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework is being developed with the Victorian Aboriginal community to address the needs of Aboriginal people including young people.

Approximately  
**17 per cent** of all young Victorians are from a **culturally and linguistically diverse background.**<sup>3</sup>

We are committed to self-determination for Aboriginal people. The Local Aboriginal Networks are at the heart of reconciliation and self-determination, providing a voice for Victoria's Aboriginal communities so they can lead the decision making around the important issues that directly affect their lives. Recently, the Local Aboriginal Networks established their Five Year Plan – a significant step towards self-determination, which identifies six priority areas for action, including support for young people.

## Culturally diverse young people

Young people from diverse backgrounds bring with them a multitude of strengths and resources. Our government is currently developing a Multicultural Policy to ensure that cultural diversity continues to be celebrated.

The Community Languages School Funding Program provides funding to support the teaching of 40 languages to approximately 36,000 students. Support is also provided to more than 54,000 English as an Additional Language (EAL) students in Victorian Government schools and English Language Schools.

The Refugee Education Support Program supports school networks to strengthen the connections between student achievement, school engagement and wellbeing to support refugee students.

We will continue to support the Multicultural Youth Network which facilitates skills development for young people from diverse backgrounds to take on leadership roles and present their views for consideration by government.

We have also launched the AFL Sports and Social Inclusion program which helps build young people's connection to the community through a range of programs at local football club level.

Our Strategic Framework to Strengthen Victoria's Social Cohesion and Community Resilience has also been released. A key priority is for all Victorians to have a strong sense of belonging, no matter what their religion, ethnicity, race, or cultural identity.

The framework will guide action to strengthen Victoria's social cohesion and to build and empower resilient communities, in order to prevent and reverse the development of racial, ethnic and religious intolerance that can lead to violence.

Work will also focus on promoting intercultural and religious engagement, strengthening and revitalising multiculturalism, and supporting the participation of young people from culturally diverse communities in economic, social and civic life.

## LGBTI young people

LGBTI young people should feel free to express who they are, safe in the knowledge they live in an inclusive society. The government's Gender and Sexuality Commissioner promotes the rights of LGBTI Victorians in the community and champions LGBTI-inclusive practices across government and society.

Through the Safe Schools Coalition Victoria, training and resources are provided to Victorian schools to enhance the capacity of teachers and leaders to address bullying and promote safe and inclusive learning environments. We have committed to continuing the implementation of the Safe Schools program in its original form into every government secondary school in Victoria to provide a universal anti-bullying initiative to address the bullying and discrimination LGBTI young people experience in schools.

The Healthy Equal Youth (HEY) Project supports LGBTI young people and promotes their rights, health and wellbeing by providing grants to community groups for innovative projects. These projects aim to raise awareness, promote acceptance of diversity, eliminate stigma and discrimination, and improve mental health, including reducing the risk of suicide among young LGBTI people. Young people will also benefit from the creation of a new Pride Centre that will showcase LGBTI history and offer free health and support services.

We are working closely with LGBTI communities and organisations to support them to be more inclusive of people from culturally diverse backgrounds through the Community Harmony Grants and Capacity Building and Participation programs. The government also funds Minus18 to improve the lives of same sex attracted and gender diverse youth, to empower them, connect them with others and help them understand themselves.



## Young people with a disability

Young people with a disability want to achieve their full potential and want greater control over their lifestyle and support arrangements. We are supporting the roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) across Victoria from 1 July 2016. The NDIS will provide greater certainty to young people with a disability that they will receive the care and support they require throughout their lives.

Through the Education State inclusive practices are being promoted in schools so they can better support young people with disabilities and special needs. The Special Needs Plan will improve students' achievements, engagement and wellbeing and help to create fairer, safer and more inclusive schools for students with special needs.

The Strengthened Pathways Planning resource supports consideration of a wider range of post-school options for young people with moderate to severe disabilities. The resources include the R U Ready Checklist, which helps young people, their parents and teachers talk about what the young person can do, their strengths and readiness for work.

Approximately **7.8 per cent of 15 to 25 year olds** are living with a **disability**.<sup>4</sup>

**One quarter of young Victorians live in rural or regional areas.<sup>5</sup>**

## Rural and regional young people

We support a range of programs that benefit young people in regional and rural Victoria. These include the Rural and Regional Local Government Youth Engagement Program, YACVic Rural, the Centre for Multicultural Youth Regional Presence Project, the Ready Set Go! Program, as well as other youth programs like Advance, FReeZA and Engage!.

Rural and Regional Local Government Youth Engagement supports young people who are not well represented in their community to participate in local decision making and change making. Projects include the Rural City of Wangaratta's Rural Advocacy Disability project and Central Goldfields Shire Council's Youth Forum.

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) has been funded to deliver YACVic Rural to increase support to young people and communities in rural and regional Victoria, by prioritising access to training, advocacy, networking and capacity building. YACVic Rural is based in Warrnambool and Swan Hill, with rural development coordinators also serving the surrounding regions.

The Centre for Multicultural Youth has been funded to establish two regional offices – one in Ballarat and the other in Gippsland – as a part of the Regional Presence Project. The offices provide programs that support young people to engage with work, school, family and community life, and promote wellbeing and belonging.

The Ready Set Go! Program is being commissioned to improve the work readiness of students in Years 7-10 in rural and remote Victorian government schools. The program offers a range of career activities that aim to build students' knowledge about the world of work and support their career aspirations and transitions.

Nine Regional Partnerships are being formed to provide a platform for rural and regional communities to have a greater say and ensure their needs are heard by government. Each Regional Partnership will include community and business leaders, including young people, and will link to the three levels of government. Regional Partnerships will engage directly with communities through Regional Summits, which will include young people.

**76 per cent** of young Victorians feel that **multiculturalism is a benefit** to their area.<sup>6</sup>

## The role of local councils

Councils play a key role in the delivery of youth services. They often provide the most immediate experience of being part of a democratic process and provide opportunities for young people to participate in their communities through funding for youth workers and support for youth councils. The Ministerial Statement on Local Government outlines opportunities to strengthen local support for social inclusion, including better support for young people. This work is vital for the future health of civil society and is being supported by Local Government Victoria and the Municipal Association of Victoria.



## Case studies – youth engagement in action

The following case studies illustrate current models of youth engagement that enable young people to share their views about policy issues, programs and services that impact on them.

### Youth Parliament

YMCA Victoria Youth Parliament is a youth-led program designed to give young Victorians the opportunity to be heard at the highest levels of government. Youth Parliament is a unique platform which engages young people from across Victoria to participate in formulating Bills and debating issues they have identified as important. Bills passed through the Youth Parliament are presented to the Minister for Youth Affairs to be distributed to relevant Ministers. Since the program's inception, more than 20 Bills have gone on to become legislation in Victoria, including:

- roadside drug testing for drivers
- mandatory wearing of a bicycle helmet.

### Young people's lived experience of vulnerability

The Central Highlands Children and Youth Area Partnership's lived experience of vulnerability program recognises that young people with a lived experience of vulnerability can provide valuable input. Young people highlighted their perceptions and experiences of education, support services and family stressors. Information provided by young people will be used to inform the future work and priorities of the Partnership. Including young people's voices in a meaningful way ensures that the Partnership achieves improved outcomes for young people and others who have similar experiences in the Central Highlands area.

## **Yarning Justice Workshop and Forum**

The Youth Justice and Disability Forensic Unit in the Department of Health and Human Services worked with the Koorie Youth Council to run the Yarning Justice Workshop and Forum. The purpose of the forum was for Koorie young people to share their perspectives and ideas about how to keep Koorie young people out of the justice system and present these ideas as recommendations to Aboriginal Justice Forum members. The project was youth-led and participants were supported by five youth facilitators. Outcomes from the workshop were presented at the Aboriginal Justice Forum.

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