

Proposal for a Youth Policy Advisory Council

youthaffairs
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Introduction

Youth Affairs Council of Victoria

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc. (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people's issues in Victoria. YACVic's vision is for a Victorian Community that values and provides opportunity, participation, justice and equity for all young people.

The main function of YACVic is to make representations to government and serve as an advocate for the interests of young people, workers with young people and organisations that provide direct services to young people. YACVic's resources are primarily directed towards policy analysis and development through consultation with its constituency. YACVic also resources the information needs of its members through regular updates and by facilitating networking within and beyond the Victorian youth sector.

YACVic actively works towards its vision by endeavouring to:

- assist young people to participate meaningfully in the various processes which formulate and implement social policy in Victoria;
- develop a framework which integrates youth affairs into social policy processes and to use that framework to advocate to government and other institutions on matters affecting young people;
- provide a focus for organisations and individuals who support the purpose statement, to share perspectives on youth affairs issues;
- provide an information and resource base which will:
 - (a) assist groups of young people working on issues of concern to them;
 - (b) assist service providers to increase their effectiveness;
- inform the community about issues affecting young people.

The purpose and structure of this paper

YACVic proposes the establishment of a Youth Policy Advisory Council to coordinate statewide youth policy development. The proposed Council would not supersede the functions or responsibilities of the existing structures that contribute to policy development. Rather the Council would bring these bodies to one table and draw on the expertise of members to formulate policy advice for the Minister of Youth Affairs. A Youth Policy Advisory Council would help to coordinate a whole-of-government approach to youth policy development and to foster more collaborative relationships between the government and non-government sectors.

This paper will outline:

- the need for a coordinated approach;
- the lessons learned from past advisory bodies; and
- the structure and functions of the proposed Youth Policy Advisory Council.

The model outlined in this paper has been developed following an examination of the former Youth Policy Development Council, informal discussions with past members of this Council and an analysis of other advisory structures that exist throughout the State Government.

The need for a coordinated approach

The Government's commitment to youth policy

The Victorian Government has made a clear commitment to prioritising the development of youth policy. In his Ministerial Statement, the Honourable Justin Madden stated:

the government recognises that youth policy should be given a significantly higher priority than in past years, and the current administrative arrangements for the development and coordination of youth policies and programs must be changed to reflect this priority.¹

A whole-of-government approach was advocated to '*overcome the constraints associated with divisions of responsibility between government departments*' and the importance of building partnerships between government and youth-related sectors was highlighted.²

Importantly, the Government also recognised that it '*cannot and must not try to work in isolation in developing a comprehensive youth policy forum for young Victorians*'.³ That is, policy development should not occur simply within bureaucratic structures but must enable the involvement of different levels of government and the broader community.

Existing structures

Following the change of government in 1999, several structures were established or revitalised to provide advice to the Minister for Youth Affairs and to undertake policy development. These structures are expected to assist the Government to meet the needs of young people in Victoria and to enact the commitments outlined above. A brief description of these bodies follows.

¹ Hon Justin Madden MLC Minister for Youth Affairs, April 2000, *Youth at the Centre – Governing with Young Victorians*, Ministerial Statement, p.2.

² Ibid, p7.

³ Ibid, p7.

Government structures

Office for Youth

The Office for Youth was established to provide a whole-of-government focus to youth affairs. The primary roles of the Office include providing policy advice to the Minister for Youth Affairs and to the Government and coordinating a whole-of-government approach to policy development. The Office also manages several programs including the Victorian Youth Development Program and Freeza.

Regional Youth Committees (RYC's)

Fifteen Regional Youth Committees provide a statewide network of regional advice on policy, planning and service provision issues relating to young people at the regional level. These committees include representatives of the Office for Youth, peak bodies, local government and community organisations. The Minister for Youth Affairs appoints members of the RYC's and they are supported by Youth Liaison Officers who are staff members of the Office for Youth.

Youth Round Tables

The Office for Youth organises a series of Youth Round Tables to promote youth participation. These Round Tables bring together groups of young people across Victoria and the Minister for Youth Affairs also attends. At least four Round Tables are held annually in both metropolitan and rural areas. Each Round Table consists of a different group of young people and a different topic is discussed at each one. Issues and recommendations arising from these discussions are reported to the Minister for Youth Affairs and other decision-makers within Government.

Interdepartmental Committee for Youth

The Interdepartmental Committee for Youth provides a forum for cooperative policy development and advice across Victorian government agencies. The Committee also aims to facilitate better coordination of services for young people across government. The Committee is chaired by the Secretary of the Department of Education, Employment and Training and includes representation from all departments.

Non-government organisations

Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic)

YACVic is the Peak Body for Youth Affairs in Victoria. The main function of YACVic is to make representations to government and to advocate for the interests of young people, workers with young people and organisations that provide direct services to young people. YACVic's undertakes policy analysis and development through consultation with its constituency. YACVic receives core funding from the Office for Youth.

Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (CMYI)

The Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues is a statewide community-based organisation. CMYI aims to enhance life opportunities for young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds by building and strengthening partnerships between young people, support services and the community. CMYI receives core funding from the Office for Youth.

Coordinating a fragmented system

The existing committees, offices and peak bodies provide policy advice to the Minister for Youth Affairs and all contribute to youth policy in Victoria. However, the current system is fragmented in its approach to policy development. Several shortcomings in the current structure can be identified. They are:

- a lack of independent and coordinated advice;
- a lack of statewide coordination;
- a lack of young people's involvement in policy development.

A lack of independent and coordinated advice

Although both formal and informal partnerships have developed between existing structures, ultimately each body determines its own policy priorities and reports separately to the Minister for Youth Affairs. This undermines the capacity for a coordinated policy approach and the Minister may receive conflicting messages about policy priorities. The effective performance of a Minister and the Government greatly depends on adequate support and advisory structures.

Much of the advice currently received is provided from within bureaucratic structures, which limits the extent of its independence. A Council that is composed of representatives from government and non-government sectors and that has statutory powers and resources to undertake policy analysis and development, would be better placed to provide independent and strategic advice.

A lack of statewide coordination

There is also a lack of statewide coordination. For example, Regional Youth Committees provide advice about local concerns. However, the Committees do not have the capacity to undertake broad social planning nor have the resources to conduct detailed research or produce publications. They are an important source of information about regional priorities but cannot provide strategic advice about statewide priorities, or make an analysis of the differences between regions, as there are only a limited number of opportunities for the Chairs of each committee to come together and discuss these issues collectively. A structure is required to draw on the workings of each of the Regional Youth Committees to identify key priorities that can be addressed from a statewide perspective.

A lack of young people's involvement in policy development

Most importantly, there is currently a distinct lack of opportunities for young people to be involved in policy development at a high level within government. Existing structures have different ways of involving young people. Some bodies invite young people to be directly involved on the committee or sub-group. However, it is more common for young people to be *consulted* on issues rather than directly involved in the policy process.

The Youth Round Tables are intended to provide young people with a direct voice to the Minister for Youth Affairs and to government. However, there are concerns that the current process limits the extent to which young people do have a real say in shaping government policy. There is a perception that the Round Tables *'are not being undertaken in a systematic and comprehensive manner. This means that there are many young people which (sic) through a lack of due processes are denied access to participation at this level, or at all'*.⁴

The one-off nature of these Round Table discussions and the way in which membership changes at each event, means that young people cannot participate in the longer-term nature of policy development. Nor do the young people have a say in the reporting outcomes of the discussions. As noted by the Western Regional Youth Committee, young people *'clearly have other things, and in their view, better things to do than sit at a table talking to each other and adults about what young people think if you are not REALLY listening (or not prepared or able to translate what they are proposing into action)*'.⁵ A process that enables young people to participate in the development of strategic priorities, to discuss solutions to problems and to see the outcomes of their work, will ensure more meaningful participation.

Young people also lack direct representation on Regional Youth Committees. RYC's are intended to *'promote and support within the region opportunities for young people to make their voices heard and to contribute to the development of advice on youth policies, programs and services'*.⁶ Participation by young people can be *'by direct membership on the Committee, through a sub-committees, through specific issue forums, or by other means'*. After reconstituting the RYC's, the Minister indicated a desire to *'see greater representation of young people on these Councils'*.⁷ However, there are currently few young people who are full members of the RYC's. Although young people can be involved through consultations and sub-groups, these processes are a step removed from direct involvement in policy processes, limiting young people's voice in government.

YACVic believes that a Youth Policy Advisory Council would assist to overcome these problems. As outlined later in this paper, the proposed model would enable at least a third of the Council to be made up of young people, providing them with direct access to policy development processes. The Council would also bring together existing structures to discuss issues in a coordinated way and to undertake collaborative work. This process

⁴ Western Region Youth Committee, *The Importance of Participation by all Young People in Every Community – A Western Region Youth Committee Position Paper*, p.7.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Department of Education, Employment and Training, July 2000, *Victoria's Regional Youth Committees: Terms of Reference*.

⁷ Minister for Youth Affairs, *Regional Youth Have Their Say: Madden*, Media Release March 6th 2000.

would better inform the development of youth policy and would provide the Minister for Youth Affairs with more independent, representative and strategic advice.

Other advisory structures within the Victorian Government

Ministers across a wide range of government portfolios receive advice from committees and councils that have been established to develop long-term and strategic policy initiatives. The following provides an example of some of the advisory bodies that have been established in Victoria recently, the membership of these bodies and the breadth of work that they undertake.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for the Victorian Institute of Teaching

Terms of Reference

- Provides advice to the Minister in relation to existing policies and, where appropriate, the development of new policy.
- Provides advice to the Minister on the allocation and application of State and Commonwealth special education funding to support children and students with disabilities.
- Provides advice on other matters referred to it by the Minister.
- Conducts research and manages projects as required from time to time by the Minister or as approved by the Minister.

Membership

- Representative from DEET.
- Representatives of primary, secondary and independent school teachers.
- Representatives of primary, secondary and independent school principals.
- Representatives of higher education institutions.
- An employer representative.
- Representative of the Joint Council of Subject Associations.

Ministerial Advisory Committee – Women's Housing Policy Advisory Group

Terms of Reference

- Provides advice on the housing and support needs of women from diverse cultures, backgrounds and socio-economic groups.
- Provides advice on housing and related issues faced by women with support needs.
- Provides input into the relevant Victorian Government policy reviews and strategy development.
- Provides comments on the implications of existing housing policy and options, with particular regard for issues relating to access, affordability, appropriateness and sustainability.
- Identifies innovative strategies to increase the housing options of women.
- Contributes to the development of coordination between housing and support for women.

- Advises on, and assists with, community consultation on the Women's Housing Policy and dissemination of information about the Policy.
- Provides to the Minister, a Women's Housing Policy containing recommendations aimed at promoting improved housing outcomes for women and advice on its further development.

Membership

- Member Legislative Assembly
- Aboriginal Housing Board, Victoria
- Mary Anderson Lodge Women's Refuge
- Public Housing Tenant
- SAAP Network Coordinator
- Housing Resources and Support Service
- Real Estate Institute of Victoria
- Inner West Migrant Resource Centre
- Tenants Union of Victoria
- Statewide Women's Community Housing Service
- The Abbeyfield Society (Australia)
- Flat Out
- Grampians Housing network
- Council to Homeless Persons
- City of Greater Dandenong

Premier's Drug Prevention Council

Terms of Reference

- Monitors, evaluates and advises the Government on prevention activities.
- Recommends whether existing prevention programs should be maintained, expanded, amended or ceased.
- Commissions research, reviews and other projects into drug prevention.
- Develops benchmarks for future education and prevention activities carried out by the community, Government and non-Government sectors.
- Engages the business, media, philanthropists and key groups to develop new ideas to tackle drug abuse.

Membership

- Director of Rehome Australia Monitoring Services Pty Ltd.
- Former Police Chief Commissioner
- General Manager, Royal Children's Hospital
- Director, Turning Point
- Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Health Promotion.
- Secondary School Teacher
- President, Vietnamese Community.
- Vice-President, YWCA.
- Youth Worker, YSAS
- Health Promotions Manager, Community Health Services.

The establishment of these and other advisory bodies signals the importance that the Government attaches to these issues. As there is no advisory committee that brings together key stakeholders in the area of youth affairs, the issues facing young people lack a high profile within government.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Youth Policy Development Council provided independent and strategic advice about issues impacting on young people. A brief history of this Council is provided in the following section. In analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the Council, a model for a new structure can be proposed.

Learning from the past

The need for new arrangements

The need to establish appropriate structures to assist in the development of youth policy was debated in the early 1980s. High levels of youth unemployment provided the impetus for this debate. A Taskforce was established in 1983 to examine existing arrangements and to devise a structure to carry out coordinated policy development.

In both government and non-government sectors, there was general agreement that existing structural arrangements for the coordination and development of youth policy were inadequate and that the more active involvement of young people was required.⁸ As a result, the Taskforce recommended the establishment of a Youth Policy Development Council (YPDC) which would provide expert advice to the Minister.⁹ The Taskforce concluded that '*policy should not be seen as the reserve of bureaucrats and alternative paths to the creation of policy should be provided*'.¹⁰ This recommendation was adopted in 1984 and arrangements made for the establishment of a YPDC.¹¹

Administrative arrangements of the YPDC

The YPDC was established under the Youth Affairs Act (1986) and was appointed for a term of three years. Its broad mandate was to develop youth policy and to give expert policy advice to the Minister for and the Government. The Council was directly responsible to the Minister and the work of the Council had to be approved by Minister. The Bureau of Youth Affairs provided a Secretariat function for the Council. The roles and functions of the council were to:

- Monitor legislation and recommend legislative changes on matters affecting young people.
- Collect and collate information about programs for young people from other parts of the bureaucracy.
- Initiate and monitor research on topics which have an impact on young people.
- Recommend funding for innovative programs and community-based research programs which will assist overall policy development.
- Advise on policy development, integration and implementation across departments.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of services to youth and develop strategies for appropriate reforms in conjunction with those responsible for the delivery of services.

⁸ Department of the Premier and Cabinet, May 1984, *Administrative Arrangements for the Coordination and Development of Youth Policy in Victoria: an Implementation Report*, p.2.

⁹ Department of the Premier and Cabinet, November 1983, *Strategy for the Coordination and Development of Youth Policy in Victoria: a Discussion Paper*.

¹⁰ Department of the Premier and Cabinet, May 1984, *ibid*, p.3.

¹¹ Department of the Premier and Cabinet, May 1984, *ibid*.

- Set up taskforces and working parties to deliberate on particular issues and forward recommendations to the Minister.
- Advise about on-going priority setting and review of government policy and programs that affect young people.
- Publish reports of the work and findings of the Council with the approval of the Minister.
- Ensure long-term planning in relation to youth policy and programs.
- Facilitate the participation of young people in development of government policy that affects them and encourage community and youth organisations to participate in the development of government policy.
- Develop methods and processes to communicate and consult with other departments, community groups and young people on issues and policy.
- Provide a channel of communication for community groups and for individuals to the Government and functional departments.¹²

The YPDC was as representative as possible of the diverse backgrounds of young people in Victoria. At least one third of the Council members had to be under the age of 26 at the time of their appointment. The members of the YPDC were:

- Chairperson.
- CEO of Bureau of Youth Affairs.
- Two representatives from YACVic.
- One representative of the MAV.
- Three nominees of the Minister.
- Three representatives of community groups.
- One representative each from the Departments of Education, Community Welfare Services and Employment and Training.
- One representative from workers with youth.
- One representative from Trades Hall Council.

The YPDC produced two major reports in its first term, '*Future Directions in Youth Services*' and '*Health for Youth Report*'.

The lessons learned

The YPDC signalled a move towards analysing youth issues within a broad social policy framework. Youth affairs were no longer limited to the domains of the labour market and recreation. When first established the YPDC was described as:

reflect(ing) a closer working relationship between government and community groups, a greater involvement of young people, including access to the policy process, and a recognition that the needs of young people encompass health, education, housing, transport, employment and income security – all policy areas.¹³

¹² Department of the Premier and Cabinet, May 1984, *ibid*, p.5.

¹³ Crabb, S., Minister for Labour, 10 April 1986, Youth Affairs Bill, VicHansard, p1027.

Several key issues emerge when analysing the strengths of the YPDC.

- The collaborative nature of the Council. The Council provided an opportunity for representatives from government departments and non-government agencies to work together in addressing the issues impacting on young people.
- The direct involvement of young people. As a third of the Council members were aged under 26, the Council also provided many young people, some students and some workers, with their first experience of policy development.
- Statutory authority. The legislative basis of the YPDC meant that it was more effective than the previous State Youth Council and it was able to tackle broad social policy issues.¹⁴

However, structural problems appear to have limited the on-going effectiveness of the Council. Initially, the Chair was a part-time appointment and this limited the amount of work that could be undertaken by the YPDC. This position was later made full-time to accommodate the extensive workload.

More significantly, tensions existed between the YPDC and the Bureau of Youth Affairs. As outlined in the administrative arrangements, the Bureau provided secretariat support to the YPDC. As the Bureau determined the level of this support, the YPDC often lacked the resources, most notably the staff it required to undertake its work. As the YPDC did not have direct control over its budget, resources had to be constantly negotiated with the Bureau.

The differential status of the Chair and Chief Executive Officer of the Bureau also contributed to these tensions. The CEO was a more senior position. This restricted the powers of the YPDC as the Chairperson lacked equal access to the Minister and equal access to resources. The work of the Council would have been made easier if there had been greater parity between the role of the Chair and that of the CEO of the Bureau of Youth Affairs.

The effectiveness of the YPDC was gradually eroded. The Council was reconstituted in 1987 with new part-time chair. It was restructured again in the early 1990s to include only members who were under 22. This is thought to have reduced its influence at a Ministerial level.¹⁵ The repeal of the Youth Affairs Act (1986) in 1996 ultimately resulted in the dissolution of the YPDC. This was met with some concern within parliament as it was felt the Government now lacked '*frank and fearless advice about the impact of government policies on young people*'.¹⁶

¹⁴ Irving, T., Maunders, D. & Sherington, G., 1995, *Youth in Australia: Policy Administration and Politics*, Macmillan Education, Australia, p. 291.

¹⁵ Irving et al, *ibid*, p. 300.

¹⁶ Kosky, L., 29th October 1996, Children and Young Persons (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill, VicHansard, p.826

The structure and functions of the proposed Youth Policy Advisory Council.

YACVic proposes the establishment of a Youth Policy Advisory Council (YPAC) to provide independent policy advice to the Minister for Youth Affairs. The proposed functions and membership of the YPAC build on the workings of the YPDC. However, the model is a not a direct replica of the YPDC. A working group would need to be established to determine the administrative arrangements of the Council.

Principles underpinning a Youth Policy Advisory Council

Before determining the functions of the proposed YPAC, it is important to identify the principles underpinning the development and work of the Council. These principles would guide the work of the YPDC and assist the Council in setting policy priorities. Guiding principles may include:

- *Youth participation* – this would be reflected in both the membership of the Council and in the consultative mechanisms established by the YPAC.
- *Community consultation* – consultation with relevant organisations and young people would occur during the development of the YPAC and at all stages of the policy development process.
- *Broad representation* – the YPAC should be as representative as possible in its membership and should consult widely when developing policy proposals.
- *Adequate resources* – the budget allocation should be commensurate with the functions of the Council and should enable adequate staffing support.
- *Cooperation and collaboration* – collaborative working relationships across levels of government and between government and non-government sectors should be promoted to ensure that policy proposals reflect a coherent and coordinated approach.

The role of the Youth Policy Advisory Council

In broad terms, the possible functions of the YPAC may involve:

- Monitoring legislation and recommending legislative changes on matters affecting young people.
- Initiating research on issues which have an impact on young people.
- Recommending new initiatives.
- Advising the Minister on policy development and the implementation of these policies across government departments.
- Advising the Minister about on-going priority setting and a review of Government policies and programs which affect young people.
- Publishing reports of the findings of the council.

- Coordinating long-term strategic planning in the development of a comprehensive youth policy.
- Facilitating the participation of young people in the whole cycle of policy development from conception to evaluation.
- Analysing the impact of the State Budget on young people and preparing annual budget submissions.
- Sharing information between representatives on the Council to develop collaborative relationships between government and non-government organisations.
- Encouraging greater youth participation at all levels of government.

The Membership of the Council

The membership of the Council needs to reflect the diversity of the community who have an interest in youth policy. It should take a non-partisan approach and consist of members of bureaucracy, the community and young people. Members would be representatives of existing government and non-government structures and would be appointed on the basis of their expertise in the area of youth affairs. Possible membership may include:

- The Minister for Youth Affairs.
- The Director of the Office for Youth.
- Representatives of key government departments including the Department of Education and Training, the Department of Human Services and the Department of Justice.
- Representatives from YACVic and CMYI.
- The Chairs of two Regional Youth Committees, one metropolitan committee and one rural committee.
- Representatives of community organisations such as CWAV.
- A representative of MAV.
- A representative of industry with a demonstrated interest in youth affairs.

Most importantly, one third of the Council's membership should consist of young people under the age of 25. Although, young people may be representatives of some of the organisations listed above, most will probably be in addition to the listed representatives.

The Council would have the ability to call on the advice of other experts as required.

An independent person, who is a member of the YPAC, should chair the Council. This person would be appointed on the basis of their skills and expertise in the area of youth affairs. The Chair would have direct access to the Minister for Youth Affairs, equal to that of the Director of the Office for Youth, and would be able to access their own resources. The Chair should not be dependent on the Office for Youth for resources, as this would limit the independence of the Council.

Resources

A key problem experienced by the former YPDC was the lack of resources, particularly adequate staff support. Although the Bureau of Youth Affairs provided Secretariat support, structural problems limited the extent of this support leaving the YPDC under-resourced. YACVic believes that the proposed YPAC should be allocated sufficient funding to carry out its functions.

Working with existing structures

YACVic does not propose that the YPAC supersedes existing structures. The Council would provide 'the missing link' to enable these bodies to work together more collaboratively. Existing bodies would continue their current work. The Council would draw on the work of its members to inform research and to assist setting priorities. In addition, clear working relationships between the Minister for Youth Affairs, the Office for Youth and the YPAC Chair would need to be established.

Possible projects

The Council's priorities should be focused to ensure the research and analysis undertaken provides long-term and strategic policy initiatives. As a starting point, there were several issues raised in YACVic's submission to the Victorian Youth Strategy that could be explored further by a Youth Policy Advisory Council.

For example, YACVic supports an inquiry into the role of local government in youth service provision in Victoria.¹⁷ There is currently no requirement that local Councils provide youth services and as such service provision can vary dramatically between Councils. A Youth Policy Advisory Council could take the lead in undertaking such a review.

An issue that is often raised is the lack of transport available for young people, particularly in regional areas, and the impact this has on many areas of a young person's life. This issue has not been addressed at a statewide level. A review of transport could be undertaken by the YPAC. This work would provide important information that could be used in a review of other areas, such as education and training, as transport availability determines young people's access to these opportunities.

¹⁷ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, April 2001, *Submission to the Victorian Youth Strategy*.